

# Contents

Prologue . . . . .	9
Act 1: Dealing with Drama . . . . .	11
Scene 1: Common Conflicts . . . . .	13
Scene 2: Communication Skills . . . . .	21
Scene 3: Dangerous Assumptions . . . . .	27
Scene 4: Indirect vs. Direct Communication . . . . .	33
Scene 5: Emotional Intelligence . . . . .	39
Act 2: Managing Anger . . . . .	47
Scene 1: Overwhelming Emotions . . . . .	49
Scene 2: Valid vs. Invalid Anger . . . . .	57
Scene 3: Explosions + Implosions . . . . .	65
Scene 4: Underground Anger . . . . .	71
Scene 5: Anger at God . . . . .	81
Scene 6: Anger at Self . . . . .	89
Act 3: Making Things Right . . . . .	95
Setting the Scene: Forgiveness ≠ Restitution . . . . .	97
Scene 1: The Language of Regret . . . . .	103
Scene 2: The Language of Responsibility . . . . .	111
Scene 3: The Language of Restitution . . . . .	117
Scene 4: The Language of Repentance . . . . .	123

Scene 5: The Language of Request . . . . .	133
Act 4: Moving Forward . . . . .	139
Scene 1: Healthy + Healing . . . . .	141
Scene 2: Letting Go . . . . .	145
Scene 3: Rebuilding Trust . . . . .	151
Backstage . . . . .	155
Quiz . . . . .	157
Apology Cheat Sheet . . . . .	165
Verses to Memorize . . . . .	167
About the Authors . . . . .	171

## SCENE 1

# Common Conflicts

**W**hen we hear the word *conflict*, most of us have negative connotations. In our minds, conflict = bad. Sometimes that's true. Some conflicts are negative and painful.

Some conflicts are healthy, though. In a movie or book, there is no plot without conflict. If every character swims merrily along, then nothing actually happens in the story. If Katniss doesn't challenge the Capitol, the story fades after the reaping. If Hamlet doesn't face down his murderous uncle/stepdad, or if the Avengers don't rally together to fight Thanos, then the villain wins unchallenged.

Conflict can stretch us. On a sports team, a coach often pits players against one another, competing for playing time and sharpening each other's skills. That's good conflict. In a friendship, if one person disagrees and is able to voice that in a healthy way, that's good conflict. When handled well, those good conflicts lead to growth. The team gets better. The friendship gets stronger. The individuals grow.

But some conflicts are unhealthy, and often, we struggle to discern between good and bad conflicts—and we have no idea how to address either type. For many of us, conflicts feel like quicksand, dragging us down, drowning us up to our eyeballs and overwhelming our senses.

How we handle conflicts will make or break our relationships. Our goal is to provide a framework for understanding relational difficulties and to offer tools to manage them effectively. Attempting to build a conflict-free life is not realistic or even desirable. Differences are critical to our growth as individuals. We need friends with different

perspectives, personalities, communication styles, and life experiences. Those kinds of friends complement and stretch us. If we isolate ourselves in a bubble and only interact with people who think/talk/live exactly like us, then we stagnate.

However, too much conflict or drama can become toxic, a drain on our energy, and a block in our growth. We want to help you correctly understand disagreements and navigate relational challenges so you can prevent, or at least minimize, the escalation of festering conflicts.

Every relationship involves conflict. By definition, relationships are dynamic, fluid, and ever-changing because they're the unique interaction between people. Most relationships are based on some commonality: for example, a common goal (those beloved/dreaded group projects in school), a common time or space (coworkers at the grocery or Chick-fil-A), common interests (lacrosse team or marching band or robotics club). We choose some of our relationships, such as our friends. Others seem to happen to us, such as our parents, siblings, teachers, or coworkers. Whatever form our relationships take, we all need to be in relationship in order to truly flourish. No person grows well in isolation.

This is the fabric of life. We are all in relationships, we all face conflicts, and we all have to learn how to navigate them so that we, and our relationships, can truly thrive.

## **Why Conflict?**

Where does conflict even come from? Let's zero in on actual people and offenses. Like any good problem-solving, specifying what the actual "problem" is and its root cause is the first step.

Meet Cole. Cole's English teacher snaps impatiently at him when he stays after class to ask for help on his argumentative essay. He does not understand her feedback on his last piece of writing, he feels anxious about earning a better grade on this essay (imagine

fire-breathing parents), and she has invited students to schedule writing conferences with her.

Cole needs to remember that the symptoms (Mrs. Jackson's rudeness) are not necessarily the problem. When your back aches, you can take painkillers, but until you address the issue actually causing the pain, like a pinched nerve or pulled muscle, the symptoms will likely return.

What is the actual problem? Cole may never know that Mrs. Jackson spent last night in the ER with her son, who snapped his collarbone at football, and she's worried about how to pay for his upcoming visit with the orthopedic surgeon. He may notice the dark circles under her eyes and the extra-venti coffee on her desk but not realize how exhausted she is. He can't control any of those issues.

What can Cole control? Did he submit his last three essays late? Has he established a pattern of complaining about his grades? Does he even look at her feedback on his previous work before submitting a fresh essay? Does he arrive to class on time? Does he treat her respectfully, or does he play games on his laptop while she's giving the class instructions? All of those are relational factors that can taint their interactions, and all of those are within Cole's control.

If Cole has done everything in his power to uphold his end, then he may need to give her a little grace and space, wait a day, and send her a polite follow-up email. And he cannot take her impatient reaction personally. Sometimes that's easier said than done but, like the duck, we have to learn to let most water roll right off our backs.

## **The Relationship Continuum**

We also need to remind ourselves that having problems with someone is not an all-or-nothing experience. We do not have to resort to extremes: "I love that teacher" vs. "I hate that teacher." Or "That friend is my closest confidant" vs. "That former friend is now dead to

me.” (Honestly, we can all be a touch extreme.) The quality and level of our relationships exists on a *continuum*, as do the challenges in those relationships. Some people irritate us. Others we really enjoy, but only up to a point, and then we need a break from them. A few people are easy and effortless to be around.

We seem to be able to communicate clearly and naturally with some people, while other people mystify us, and they don't seem to get us. Understanding another human takes a lot of time and energy. We might sigh and wonder, “Is it even worth it?”

Is it? Let's visualize a team of twenty players. On that team, let's say you become close friends with two; you really click. Most of the team may always hover in the acquaintance category: you never feel close to them, but you figure out how to work well together. Then maybe there are two who rub you the wrong way because you're wired opposite in terms of personality and communication style. You tolerate each other, but you wouldn't choose to sit together on a road trip. Then there's one player whom you actively dislike because of some unresolved conflict that clouds the relationship. (We can work on that.) And finally, you may have a rare person who doesn't feel safe because of a history of betrayal, and you wisely choose to minimize your contact with that player. Notice the range of relationships on that one team. That's typical of life.

## **Misunderstanding + Miscommunication**

Some conflicts boil down to simple misunderstandings or miscommunications. Sometimes we *mishear* people: literally, we do not accurately hear what the other person said. Cole's English teacher may have told him to “bring a completed draft of your essay during activity period,” and he may have heard her say she “won't look at a completed draft, period.” Big difference.

We can also fall in the trap of *misinterpreting* the message that

someone is sending us. Cole's teacher may have wanted him to bring her a completed draft to respond to because she thinks that will help him the most in the writing process, but he is so stuck on his outline that he can't even begin to write the draft. He misinterprets her willingness to help him; he thinks she won't. And she thinks he is unwilling to do what she has asked, which is a misinterpretation.

Their dual misinterpretation is a comedy of errors, but it feels more like a frustrating tragedy.

The skill of active listening can help us avoid this trap. Try closing out a conversation with a clarifying statement. After an intense conversation with her coach after practice, Mckenna summarizes, "What I hear you saying is that you want me to work on my 1v1 defending and winning balls out of the air. Is that right, Coach?" The coach now has the chance to confirm or clarify. Communication success.

### **Flat-Out Differences**

Some conflicts are the result of natural differences with others: different perspectives, opinions, and preferences. This is normal, and even healthy. If a player can only play for one style of coach, it doesn't bode well for the athlete's future. If a student can only perform on a multiple-choice test, that limitation will hurt her academically. We have to learn to be flexible and begin to recognize that some of our relational conflicts are the result of innocent differences of opinion or style and are simply not worth fighting over.

### **Clashing Personalities**

Some people simply rub us the wrong way. They aren't doing anything wrong; they are just so different. We have distinct personality styles and communication patterns. Have you ever taken a personality test (or several)? These tests sort personality traits into a myriad of categories, such as interpersonal energy: introversion vs.

extroversion; invisible motivations that drive behaviors, such as the Enneagram; cultural orientations like individualism vs. collectivism; and so on. These tests aren't measuring right vs. wrong traits. They simply help us understand ourselves and others better.

Consider the curious case of Kate and Laila, her boyfriend Drew's mom. Kate has grown up in a family where communication is polite but very direct. People say what they mean. They're kind but straight-up honest. When Kate started dating Drew, she sometimes shocked him with her honesty, though he found it refreshing. He always knows exactly where he stands with her. Drew's mom, Laila, however, grew up in a very different culture. She is an equally kind person but communicates in an opposite style: soft and indirect. Neither style is right or wrong—they're just different.

When Kate says, "Would y'all like to come over for our Fourth of July party?" what she means is "You are invited and welcome." It's a straightforward invitation meant to be taken at face value.

Laila can't decide what to think: *Is there actually space for us? Is this a token invitation? Do they really want our family to come? Surely it's an imposition, isn't it? If they really mean it, won't they follow up and ask again?* An indirect communicator at heart, Laila replies, "Oh, we couldn't possibly come." What she wants is reassurance that Kate's family wants them to come; what Kate hears is they can't come, so she drops it. They're both speaking English, but they are not speaking the same language. Communication failure.

## Feeling Disrespected

Most of us are too touchy. We get offended far too easily. A word of caution for all of us: When you feel that initial flash of offense, don't go nuclear. Don't assume the worst of the other person. Each of us carries around weights of unspoken expectations, and each of us can find ten or one hundred little opportunities to feel offended every day. If at all possible, don't.

People are sensitive to different things. (Side note: If you haven't yet, read *A Teen's Guide to the 5 Love Languages* for more details on how to understand yourself and others on a deeper level.) Someone who values Time may feel offended if she's not invited with a group of friends to go get smoothies after practice. A person who values Words may feel more sensitive when the director stops the entire rehearsal to single him out for feedback, especially if that director uses an intense tone. The director may think she's showing the musician respect; the student may take the feedback way too personally.

### **Conflict Resolution**

We live in a world where too many conflicts are “resolved” through violence, or behind the anonymity and vicious tone of the internet, or by simply discarding every relationship that gets the tiniest bit difficult. But **what if? What if** we all learned to resolve conflict more effectively? **What if** we learned to work through conflict, rather than lash out in anger? **What if** we took the time to repair our fractured relationships? **What if** we became brave enough to extend the olive branch of peace? **What if** we learned to see the humanity in others and chose to love rather than hate? **What if** we assumed the best in others, rather than the worst?

For the rest of this book, let's explore that magical **what if**.

## Reflection

- In your mind, is all conflict bad? Can there be good/healthy conflict that makes you better? Give examples.
- Have you ever experienced a team dynamic in which everyone got along and there was zero conflict? If so, do you think that was genuine—meaning, everyone liked each other and was truly at peace—or was the surface “peace” due to an avoidance of conflict?
- Think about your own personality. What types of people do you tend to struggle with? Why do you think that is? In your experience, have you been able to improve those relationships over time, and if so, how?
- In your opinion, how realistic is it to expect a lack of conflict in all your relationships? Is there an acceptable level of conflict or tension for you? Describe.
- Why do you think most of us get offended so easily?

## SCENE 2

# Communication Skills

The day Santiago tore his ACL felt like the worst day of his life. His dominant season: gone. His dreams of being recruited for college: vanishing. His central role as the captain of his team: replaced. His mental health: crushed.

At first Santiago's team was incredibly supportive. Several friends showed up at the hospital on the day of his surgery. A few came over to play video games with him and keep him company while he was immobilized and recovering. The supportive messages flowed in, and then . . . gradually . . . silence.

He had played with these guys for years. Were they still his friends now that he couldn't play? One of the newer players took his starting spot and was playing out of his mind. Did they even need him, let alone remember him? Was it personal, or were they just busy?

The team sensed Santiago's discomfort, so they tried to give him space. They didn't want him to feel like they were rubbing it in his face when they played a big game, especially when they won without him. They created a separate text string that didn't include him so they wouldn't disturb him.

And the silence felt deafening to Santiago.

Not all conflicts are the result of major events that cause serious relational ruptures. In fact, many, maybe even most, relational

difficulties in our homes, on our teams, and with our friends stem from minor glitches that can be addressed through some practical strategies. If we can learn to improve our communication skills, then we can avoid the majority of disagreements and conflicts that, like pesky weeds, are just waiting to sprout if we ignore or avoid them. In other words, if we can be proactive in our relationships so that conflicts don't explode, then we won't have to go through the more intense process of repairing broken relationships. As the ancient saying goes, "An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure." All in favor of some easy prevention strategies?

These five communication skills can help you avoid a flood of unnecessary conflicts:

1. Check for understanding with active listening.
2. Clarify misperceptions, misinterpretations, and misattributions of motives.
3. Commit to direct communication (vs. indirect).
4. Avoid deception, in all its sneaky forms.
5. Accept that others view the world differently than you—and that's okay.

Here's the guarantee on the side of the box: If you build these five behaviors into your daily interactions, you'll see the number and intensity of your disagreements plummet.

### **Can You Hear Me?**

Who's good at multitasking? Did every reader raise a hand?

False! We humans tell ourselves that we can multitask: texting, social media, homework, music, conversation, family dinner, show in the background, everything all at once. It's a sloppy habit that most of us are guilty of. But the truth is that humans, unlike computers, have singular wiring. We can do one task (well) at a time.

At the pace at which most of us live, trying to do seven things at

once, with constant background noise and distractions, we set ourselves up for relational misunderstandings. We can prevent a slew of conflicts simply by slowing down, shutting off distractions, and devoting our full attention to the speaker.

Experiment today. When someone wants to talk to you, consciously turn your phone face down, and mute all other distractions. Give the speaker both of your ears and both of your eyes. Don't rush the speaker along by completing his sentences. Offer him the gift of your undivided attention. Listen completely.

### **I Think I Heard You Say . . .**

After you listen well, check for understanding. Summarize what the speaker said and what, if anything, is being asked of you. This works wonders to simmer down conflicts.

Consider the following scenarios and pick the best response.

**Case study 1:** The director feels frustrated with the entire cast and crew, who came to rehearsal unprepared and unfocused. She pulls a small group of the veterans aside and vents on you all, which maybe isn't the most professional response, but you can see where she's coming from. You collectively were an artistic disaster today. Which response defuses the conflict?

- A. "Ms. Smith, relax. We have a full month till opening night. We'll be fine; we always are."
- B. "Okay, okay, we get it, Ms. Smith. Just move on already."
- C. "Ms. Smith, I hear you saying that this was a weak rehearsal. We agree. You want us to set today aside and come back tomorrow with a different level of focus."

**Case study 2:** Your dad is planning to take the Jeep to Home Depot. He storms back into the house furious: the gas tank is empty, the back seat is filled with empty Gatorade bottles, and the floor is covered

in mud and turf pellets. The Jeep is trashed. Your dad demands to know: Is this your work, or your older brother's? Conveniently, your brother is out with friends, so he's an easy target. Which response defuses the conflict?

- A. "Not me. That must have been Jack. Plus I drive the Jeep the least, and it's not that bad, Dad."
- B. "Seriously, Dad, your idea of taking turns cleaning the Jeep will never work. Forget about it."
- C. "Dad, I'm sorry the Jeep is a mess. I don't know if it was Jack or me or some combination, but I understand why you feel frustrated. I hear you saying that you want us to take more responsibility to clean the Jeep, and that seems fair."

Empathy works wonders. If you chose script C for each case study, you just defused the bomb before it exploded.

Even when you don't fully agree with the speaker, you can validate their views. The practice of restating others' arguments, especially when you think they are wrong, requires maturity and practice.

### Communication Tips

Scan this list of communication tips. Do these seem obvious? Are you nodding your head? That's a great sign. Let's make sure to consistently apply these techniques when conflicts spark:

Be respectful. (Try a Southern-style "sir" or "ma'am" on an irritated adult. Works magic.)

Convey gratitude. ("Thanks, Dad, for letting us drive the Jeep.")

Show interest in others' ideas; the universe doesn't revolve around you.

Even when you disagree—*especially* when you disagree—repeat back what the speaker said to show that you get it. (All-pro tip: If the speaker keeps repeating herself, that may be your

clue that she doesn't think you get what she's saying.)

Add humor, when appropriate. Most of life isn't WWII. Acting moody makes problems seem bigger. Being positive can reset the tone of a conversation.

If you're in a tough conversation with a defensive or hostile speaker, then do *not* . . .

Physically escalate the conflict (pointing a finger, raising the volume, slamming a door, crossing your arms to convey defensiveness, etc.).

Take personal shots. Resist it!

Use extreme words such as *always*, *none*, and *never*. We abuse superlatives. ("This is the worst family in the history of the world!" Really? No, not really.)

Blame others.

Make excuses for yourself.

Mock and smirk.

Escalate the argument in front of others, drawing them into the fray and making the speaker feel cornered.

Yes? Yes. If we can learn to consistently apply these communication skills, then we can neutralize a ton of conflicts before they fester or escalate. Then we can save our energy for more important things in life.

Back to Santiago at the start of this chapter: At the end of the season, when Santiago had fully recovered from his ACL injury, he faced a tough choice. Should he stay with his longtime team, who had seemingly iced him, or find a new team and start fresh? His answer will likely depend on how well he communicated with his team, and how well they kept him engaged. Could his entire future in sports come down to . . . communication?

## Reflection

- What does multitasking look like in your life? We all do it, so let's come clean. What tasks do you try to do all at once? Honestly reflect on how this affects the quality of your communication.
- Describe a friend who's a strong communicator. What does he or she do that makes you feel heard?
- Assuming you buy the premise of this chapter (that we can prevent a ton of little conflicts simply by communicating better), think of a recent mini-conflict in your life that you could have defused earlier, before the spark ignited into a wildfire. What simple things could you have done differently?
- Humans love to make excuses. Check out Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. This is the first conflict in human history, and it turns into a game of hot potato: "She made me do it!" "No, it was that sneaky snake!" How do you react when someone disappoints you and then makes a lame excuse?
- Scan back over the two lists of tips (the Dos and Don'ts). Think about the conflicts in your family of origin. Where do those usually fall apart?