**Optimal Outcomes: Free Yourself from Conflict at Work, at Home, and in Life by Jennifer Goldman-Wetzler**

**Excerpt: Conflict Habits (approx. 2000 words) (pp25-31)**

**Practice 1: Notice Your Conflict Habits and Patterns**

**Conflict Habits**

Based on research, as well as years of teaching and consulting to organizational leaders, I’ve identified four conflict habits that, despite our best intentions, keep us stuck in patterns that perpetuate the conflict loop.

As you read through the descriptions below, there may be a moment when you realize that your own habits are part of the problem you’re facing. You may feel a defensiveness rising, a “that’s not me” voice in your head.

I want you to know that being part of the problem doesn’t make you a terrible person. It only makes you human.

If you want to free yourself from conflict, the first practice is to notice how your conflict habits might be contributing to it.

As Doug Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, the authors of the best-selling book Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most, put it, whether you are responsible for 5 percent, 50 percent, or 95 percent of the situation you’re in isn’t the point. The point is that multiple people’s contributions have created the situation; you and others have jointly contributed to making the situation what it is.

Your primary conflict habit may represent your own contribution to some of the challenging situations you find yourself in.

The good news is that once you understand how your own habit may be getting in your way, you can then choose to stop and do something different. In fact, recent research on individual and organizational learning conducted by researchers at Harvard Business School suggests that performance improves when people reflect on their own behavior. If you acknowledge the way
in which you are contributing to a tricky dynamic, you are one step closer to changing the situation for the better.

**Blame Others**

Some of us learn from a young age that to get what we want, we need to directly and aggressively pursue it. My client Javier, the founder and CEO of a flashy, award-winning design firm, was one of those people. He was hyper-confident, born into the kind of family that has academic buildings named after them, whose parents celebrated boldness and strength above all other qualities. He was also incredibly talented, which put his self-assurance off the charts.

At his best, his competitive nature was a huge asset. He was a fearless advocate for the company and only too happy to plow through business challenges that might have led other entrepreneurs to weep. For example, his team was in awe of his ability to single-handedly identify, in a matter of minutes, dozens of activities they could pursue to fend off a competitor creeping up on their space. However, there were times he leaned on his competitive spirit too heavily, to the point where it got warped into blaming and attacking others.

Though Javier was an extreme case, many wonderfully competitive spirits, from all kinds of backgrounds, develop the **Blame Others** habit. If that’s you, perhaps you’ve experienced the results of your behavior: other people with strong personalities are liable to react by counterattacking you, while people who are conflict avoidant shut down completely.

If others counterattack, your competitive spirit leads you to attack back, which only escalates the conflict. Or if they shut down, you’re often stuck, unable to move forward or get what you want without their agreement or help. Even if you can move ahead on your own, doing so can lead to more conflict when they learn that you’ve done so without them.

In short, the Blame Others habit typically produces a loss rather than the win you intended. Sometimes you lose face, while other times you lose money, relationships, time, energy, and focus.

In Javier’s case, the Blame Others habit showed its true destructiveness in his relationship with Tara, an old friend and his current head of sales. Tara was a mild Brit who believed in the power of polite civility and also an über-intelligent entrepreneur who had the grit needed to
exponentially expand the firm’s market share. When he had hired her, Javier had thought she had exactly the background he needed to help scale up.

However, one day Javier stormed into Tara’s office to address how slowly the hiring process for the sales department was going. When he loudly blamed her for putting the brakes on poaching talent from another company and then issued new marching orders, Tara simply shut down. That type of interaction happened repeatedly, and whenever it did, the louder he got, the less she heard—and afterward, she’d stay away from him for as long as she could.

Shut Down

Like Tara, maybe you shut down in the face of conflict. Your good intentions, to avoid confrontation, can be useful in situations where you’re too upset to have a productive conversation. However, when you avoid conflict at any cost, your behavior goes beyond simply avoiding things when you’re too upset; you become incommunicative, which allows situations to fester, making them worse, not better. The typical outcome is that the conflict is prolonged in “simmer mode.” It remains unaddressed until it eventually breaks out again, sometimes more intensely than before.

Alexandra and Jayson worked together at a global law firm. When they were finishing a meal with some friends at the company cafeteria one day, Alexandra casually asked Jayson if she could transfer one of his star associates onto her team since she had a huge case coming up that would require the best talent at the firm.

Jayson demurred, avoiding the question. He felt miffed. The associate in question was already working on a tough, important case and it bothered him that Alexandra seemed to assume that her project was more important than his own. Jayson knew he’d have to say no, but he was already late to his next meeting and didn’t have time to get into a heated debate right there in the cafeteria.

When Alexandra emailed Jayson a week later saying she really needed the associate and asked again if it was okay to make the transfer, Jayson didn’t have time to respond to the email. He was too busy with casework.
When Jayson got another email from Alexandra the following week saying that if she didn’t hear from Jayson by the end of the day, she would let the associate know about the switch, Jayson went into crisis mode. He had to put all his casework on hold while he dealt with Alexandra’s threat.

**Shame Yourself**

Unlike Javier, who blamed Tara for what he saw as her mistake, you may blame yourself when you’re in conflict. When you take the blame, your well-intentioned goal is to learn and do better next time. The upside is that you’re taking responsibility for your own actions and you’re focused on how you can improve. But when you’re compelled to do this regardless of the extent to which you played a part in any particular situation, and when you feel that not only did you do something wrong but you are bad or wrong, your original intention to learn becomes distorted. Though you may extract some helpful lessons, your learning is overshadowed by shame. The conflict is prolonged while you put yourself through the wringer unnecessarily.

When Marcus’s boss told him that his lack of knowledge about a client’s business had put their company into a tough spot at a client meeting, Marcus immediately let his boss know that he would learn whatever was needed so this wouldn’t happen again. Inside, he felt deeply ashamed about his lack of knowledge and blamed himself for how poorly the meeting had gone. Later that night, alone in his bed, he told himself, “My boss is right. I don’t know anything about the client’s business. I’d better go back to school and get a real degree. I should’ve known I didn’t have what it takes to be successful here. Who was I kidding? I can’t believe I was so stupid . . . “ His desire to improve was helpful, but blaming and shaming himself by stewing in negative self-talk reduced the odds that he would do better in the future. All that negativity distracted him from learning and only kept him stuck in conflict while the wheels of his mind spun around and around.

**Relentlessly Collaborate**

When faced with conflict, you may seek to collaborate with others. Your goal is to resolve conflict amicably. Sometimes you’re able to do this, as when you and your colleagues are trying to solve a problem and each of you has functional knowledge the others can benefit from. You
share expertise, brainstorm options, and solve the problem. But often, because of unaddressed, deeply held values and emotions, one or more people are not prepared to collaborate.

Although it may not seem so on the surface, particularly because collaboration is so highly prized in our culture, your seeking to collaborate in such circumstances can be just as counterproductive as engaging in any of the other conflict habits. When you’re relentlessly collaborative, your well-intentioned openness to others becomes warped. You’re on a mission to collaborate at any cost. You end up wasting valuable time and energy devising potential solutions that will never satisfy the others involved.

Either you reach a “Band-Aid” solution that unravels later, or things escalate into a more heated dispute, all while time continues to tick by. This happens in the international sphere, where diplomatic leaders spend years trying to collaborate with others who have no interest in doing so, and it also happens in more common interactions.

After eighteen months as a top-performing account executive at Javier’s prestigious design firm, Akiko had her sights set on becoming chief operating officer, a position that had recently become vacant. Javier agreed that Akiko was the best fit for it. However, on a few occasions, Tara and Javier had already had informal conversations that had led Tara to assume that she would be offered the role, which would represent a significant promotion for her in terms of both responsibility and stature.

When Javier offered the role to Akiko, Tara was furious and threatened to quit. Since Tara was already a key member of the team and also a good friend of Javier’s, he didn’t want to lose her. He told Akiko and Tara that it was up to them to see if they could share the role. Akiko had been trained in conflict resolution skills, and that, along with her collaborative nature, led her to try to work it out with Tara.

For many months, Akiko developed option after option with Tara. Tara would entertain each idea but ultimately reject it. The more time that went by, the more frustrated Akiko became. After several months of conversation, Tara continued to refuse all the options. The chief operating officer role was still vacant, and the relationship between Akiko and Tara had deteriorated badly.

**Understand Your Own Conflict Habits**
Self-knowledge is power, and understanding your conflict habits will loosen their grip on you. Review the four descriptions. Which one might be your primary habit? Although you may use different habits depending on whether you are at work, at home, or in the community, it is still useful to ask yourself which habit you use *most* often.

If that’s hard to answer, consider this: Which habit feels most *comfortable* or *alluring* to you? Remember, you use each habit with good intentions. So be honest. You’re not doing anyone any good by identifying someone else’s habit. Knowing yourself is the first step toward freedom.

Javier, the CEO of the design firm, certainly wasn’t happy to admit it, but he knew that his modus operandi was to yell at people when they didn’t do what he wanted. Interestingly, he thought he did this more at work than at home. His fiancée was the closest person in the world to him. She understood him and helped him as much as he helped her. At work, people were always angering him by telling him bad news, interrupting him, and doing things badly or completely wrong. It was easy to fly off the handle when he was surrounded by difficult people all day long. But if he was really honest with himself, he could admit that whether at home or at work, when he got upset, Blame Others was his default.