

The definitive DIY guide to solving problems
and getting back in the groove.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION FOR MUSICIANS

[AND OTHER COOL PEOPLE]

*"The band is back! Conflict resolution
triumphs again...highly recommended"*

- Steven J. Haines

Director, Miles Davis Jazz Studies
University North Carolina Greensboro



Helene Arts and Ken Ashdown

Excerpt from Conflict Resolution for Musicians (and Other Cool People)

Conflict Resolution for Musicians (and Other Cool People) by Helene Arts and Ken Ashdown

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Part One – Some Basic Conflict Theory

By the end of this section, you will be able to

- differentiate between disagreement, conflict, and harassment or bullying
- evaluate the costs of conflict
- recognize four warning signs of conflict: Emotional—Physical—Behavioural – Relational
- determine when it's appropriate to get help managing or resolving a conflict
- assess and evaluate a conflict situation
- distinguish between the types of conflict resolution assistance available
- locate resources for assistance with conflict resolution.

Conflict: A signal that something needs to change

Conflict is a word we hear a lot—it's in the news practically every day—but don't necessarily think about. What does it really mean? And, more importantly, what does a person mean when they say, "I'm in a conflict with my bassist/vocalist/drummer/etc."? Ironically, there is no single, universal definition of conflict. There are definitions in encyclopaedias, and you can look it up in other books about conflict, but you will soon find that there isn't one common meaning of the term. So, for the purpose of this book and your musical journey, we are going to define conflict as follows: it's simply *a signal that something needs to change*, either between individuals or in a given situation.

By defining it this way, we hope to do two things, the first of which is to take some of the emotional heat out of the term.

People fear conflict, often with good reason. But don't let anxiety control you or make you avoid conflict completely; as we'll soon explain, some conflict can actually be good for you! Our second goal is to let you know that there is hope in conflict and that it doesn't necessarily mean the end of your band. On the contrary, it simply lets you know that something needs to be fixed before you can move on.

You know that moment when you are listening to your new composition and it doesn't sound quite right? Those are musical signals telling you that something needs to change in the song, whether it's a chord, a melody line, or a harmony. It's the same idea with conflict: it's a signal telling you that something in a relationship, or in a situation, needs to shift. In other words, the personal or situational harmonics are off. It doesn't mean that the whole song (or your co-writer!) is wrong and that you have to trash the tune or break up the band.

Moreover, the mere fact that there is a conflict doesn't tell the whole story; it's just a symptom of something else. The bigger picture includes *how* you got to this point and what happened that led to the issue. Somewhere along the way, something has gone wrong between you and another person, or with the situation you are in, and now you find yourself in conflict. Something needs to change or the conflict will continue, and maybe worsen.

Imagine meeting four band members in conflict. They are at the point where they might say, "Yeah, it's pretty bad, we're thinking of going our separate ways." Clearly this conflict didn't randomly appear one day in the middle of band practice. Rather than shrug and accept the split as inevitable, you'd probably ask the group, "Where did the conflict come from? What factors led up to it? Surely it wasn't spontaneous."

"Well, of course not," they would probably answer. "We had different ideas about where we should go with our new recording. We tried to work it out at first, but we couldn't, and things just went downhill from there."

The fact that they ended up in a conflict tells you that something went off the rails between them somewhere along the line. The clash of ideas for their new album just means one or more band members found something fundamentally dissatisfying about the band's process, such as:

- how they handle creative differences
- how they make decisions
- how they talk about difficult subjects
- how they collaborate
- how they react to triggers such as ego, control, respect, etc.

In this example you can see that conflict is really just a sign that *how this band has been handling some aspect of its relationship, or how it has been dealing with this situation, needs to change*. After all, if it was a simple disagreement and nothing needed to change then there would be no conflict.

The same is true for you and your band (or the band you manage, the artist[s] on your roster, etc.): conflict is simply a sign that there needs to be a shift in your relationship or in the particular situation. That's all! It's not fatal. The real challenge comes when conflict goes unmanaged and escalates.

Having defined conflict as simply a signal that something needs to change, it's useful to differentiate it from other states that are potentially more damaging.

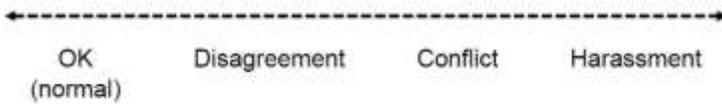
The Difference between Disagreement, Conflict, and Bullying/Harassment

There are three terms that people tend to use interchangeably: *disagreement*, *conflict*, and *harassment* (of which *bullying* is one form). Depending on how riled up you are, you

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might use any one of these words to describe the current state of affairs. But it's useful to make a distinction, because there is a difference between what these words actually mean and, consequently, a difference in how to deal with each situation most effectively.

To distinguish these terms, let's place disagreement, conflict, and harassment on a continuum of pain or emotional distress. It might look like this:



It's important to note that this continuum is *not* a time line: situations that are OK don't necessarily become disagreements over time, disagreements don't always become conflict, and conflict doesn't always turn into harassment eventually. This can and does happen, but only under certain conditions. Remember, it's a continuum of *emotional discomfort*, which means that a disagreement can be quite uncomfortable, but it doesn't feel anywhere near as upsetting as out-and-out conflict does; and even those very unpleasant feelings don't compare to harassment (or bullying), when people can experience violation or feel fear, extreme powerlessness, and so on.

It's important to know the difference between these states, because if you understand what has to happen in order for a disagreement to become a conflict, and for conflict to become harassment, then you can use that knowledge to prevent things from getting worse. The harsh reality is that if a disagreement is not handled well it *can* escalate into conflict, and a conflict that remains unresolved *has the potential* to turn into a harassment

situation. Clearly neither are desirable outcomes, but going down that road is very much within your power to prevent.

On the far left of the continuum, when everything is OK between people (a normal, non-conflicted state), there is no problem: conversations carry on as normal and the level of emotional distress is at zero. All is good and everyone's in their happy place. But sometimes issues arise; stuff happens. When problems surface, you usually try to work them out early on in the game. It isn't always easy, but you try. And in the process of trying to work them out, if you find yourselves stuck but still fundamentally getting along, then that's a disagreement. You might differ on something, but *you* are still good—in other words, your relationship is intact. You still like, trust, and respect each other. As the cliché goes, you simply agree to disagree. It's nothing personal.

Conflict is different. Conflict means that you are likely in disagreement over a particular issue and, furthermore, something has happened between you and the person with whom you have the disagreement. Depending on how serious that something is, your relationship has probably sustained some damage; things have been said and you are hurting, feeling negatively towards each other. Trust is on shaky ground. Respect is faltering. The situation has become personal. Emotions are running high(er), and phrases commonly heard in situations like this include, “You betrayed me,” “You have ruined things,” “Obviously you don't care,” “You never listen,” “You do this all the time,” “I don't give a shit anymore,” “I'm getting sick of this,” “I'm so pissed off/hurt/disappointed/frustrated,” etc. Conflict is a very different—and stronger—state than disagreement, so conflict rates higher on the continuum of emotional distress.

Harassment (along with bullying) is something else altogether. With harassment, there doesn't need to be a pre-existing disagreement, and there may not even have been an initial conflict between the parties. Instead, someone might have exhibited a behaviour that you find offensive—for example, persistent jokes

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about your playing—and despite asking them several times to stop, they continue. Perhaps someone is using social media to deliberately humiliate you or intentionally sabotage your reputation. Maybe someone has some information on you and is using that power to intimidate you. Or it might be that someone has acted contrary to a law or policy, such as discrimination or sexual harassment.

Regardless of the specifics, harassment can be defined as some sort of violation of a person's human rights. If you are dealing with a situation at the harassment level, then please get help from someone with experience in this area who can give you the advice and support that you need. This person may be a professional of some kind or a wise and trusted friend or colleague—whatever works for you—but do get that help. (We'll discuss when to get help, what kind to get, and where to get it, later in Part I.)

Returning to our continuum of emotional distress, you can see how each one of these states, from *OK* through *harassment*, feels quite different, and each of these terms means something just as distinct.

Now that you know the terminology and the basic differences between these states, you have just increased your awareness of how to prevent things from going south. In a nutshell, if you find yourself in a disagreement with someone, *keep focused on the issue*—that is, the *thing* that needs to be fixed. Don't let it become personal! In other words, avoid shifting the focus from *what* needs to be fixed, to *who* needs to be fixed. Once the parties in a disagreement begin talking about what's wrong with each other, instead of the problem central to the conflict, they have just made things worse and much harder to resolve.

The good news, however, is that subsequent sections of this book will give you many valuable tools you need to productively deal with disagreements when they arise, to keep them from becoming personal, and to prevent disagreements from escalating

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into conflicts. You will learn basic techniques and skills for resolving many different types of conflict.

The costs of conflict

One thing is sure: conflict that goes unresolved or is poorly managed can be expensive on many levels. The obvious example of the costs of conflict is war: trillions of dollars are spent funding the military machine, to say nothing of the costs associated with so-called “collateral damage.” This includes the loss of lives, shattered individuals, destroyed families, ruined health, devastated communities...the list, unfortunately, is long. That’s often the way it is with lesser conflicts, too, like the ones we encounter in our day-to-day lives.

When conflict is not resolved, or at least isn’t handled well, there are always costs attached. Although it’s hard to find accurate figures (because the costs are largely hidden), conflict is the single most preventable expense in the workplace. In fact, in 2005, Section 207 of the Canadian Public Service Labour Relations Act (PSLRA) made it mandatory for all federal government departments and agencies to have a mechanism in place whereby employees could access alternative dispute resolution (ADR). This was because the costs of harassment and grievance complaints for Canada’s single largest employer (i.e., the Public Service) were shown to be greatly reduced when conflict resolution mechanisms were made available. In family life, the damage of conflict extends far beyond the financial, often resulting in broken families with one or both parents stressed out and their children traumatized. Conflict in the arena of politics can result in terrible decisions that adversely affect not only the human population, but the natural world as well.

Conflict in the entertainment industry produces all kinds of

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unwanted drama, and the more pricey extremes can include contract terminations and the dissolution of creative and business partnerships, to cite just a few examples. When it comes to the music industry, the costs of conflict are enormous—and possibly surprising. A selective list would include:

- *Absences due to stress/health.* Record companies, publishing companies, bands, management companies and agents—to name just a few major categories of those affected—all suffer to varying degrees from the hidden costs associated with conflict. Some cases of absenteeism can be directly attributed to a person’s unwillingness or inability to deal with someone else at work, while many others are caused by the manifestation of genuine physical symptoms related to stress, such as headaches, nausea, or other aches and pains. Band members can also suffer from stress and health-related absenteeism. It may be, for example, that the reason one of your band members is chronically late or missing is not due to substance abuse but to the desire to avoid conflict. (Another possibility is that apparent drug or alcohol abuse is actually a symptom of a larger problem and is a coping mechanism to deal with stress and anxiety around conflict.)
- *Related health issues.* The cost of counselling to help overcome the fear and anxiety attached to a particular workplace conflict can be prohibitive, as can the cost of dealing with the physical symptoms of stress and anxiety as outlined above. Visits to the doctor, physiotherapy, medications...it all adds up.
- *Confusion or disruption of band roles.* Some band members might relinquish certain key duties, like booking gigs or renting rehearsal space, if they lead to conflict. Some

conflicts might result in band members being stripped of certain voting rights or other privileges.

- *Sabotaged or destroyed work.* In fits of anger, some musicians have been known to erase or alter recordings. In a dispute with their original record company, EMI, British band Dexys Midnight Runners once stole and effectively held hostage the master tapes for its much-anticipated second album. Gigs may need to be cancelled if a band member walks out in the wake of an unresolved or poorly managed conflict.
- *Reduced productivity.* Conflict drains energy and can waste valuable rehearsal or writing time. Not surprisingly, bands find their output diminished when faced with conflict.
- *Loss of skilled band members.* Countless bands have suffered the departure of valued members, often to the lasting detriment of all involved. At the risk of sparking debate over aesthetics and/or commercial success, we suggest that The Velvet Underground lost a vital ingredient to their signature sound when John Cale left; Roxy Music was never quite the same without Brian Eno; and The Clash all but ended shortly after Mick Jones departed. These are just three of countless examples where the loss of a group member resulted in a change of fortune. It could be argued that some lineup changes are beneficial in the long run, but certainly not all. The key question is whether it is a risk you and your group are willing to take.
- *Auditioning and orientation of new band members.* In the business world, it's common knowledge that recruiting, "on-boarding," and training new hires is one of the most expensive processes undertaken by human resources

practitioners, especially if the new recruits don't survive the probationary period. The same is true with bands; it takes a lot of time, effort, and patience to find and induct a new band member with just the right look, sound, attitude and/or musical pedigree.

- *Loss of creative ideas.* Conflict can drain valuable creative energy or lead to band members withholding ideas and input, especially if they fear conflict arising in the wake of their contributions.
- *Inferior quality decisions.* Decisions that are made in haste just to “get it over with,” or made while one or more band members’ input is being withheld, are almost always ones that don’t last. Equally questionable are decisions made when one faction “gangs up” on another to outvote them. (Later we’ll see that conflict, managed productively, can actually be crucial to getting the best quality decisions out of a group.)
- *Unproductive or inefficient brainstorming.* Similarly, the quality of any creative activity——such as coming up with a band name or album title, or jamming away to develop song hooks——suffers as a result of conflict. It’s easy to imagine an unhappy player keeping her best ideas to herself “just in case” the band breaks up and those ideas are needed for a solo album or the next band.
- *Damaged relationships at home/in society or community.* A conflict might originate inside the band (or organization), but conflicts have a habit of “leaking out” into other domains of a person’s life. We call this the “wallpaper bubble effect,” and if you’ve ever tried to lay wallpaper, you know how it works: suppressing an air bubble in one

area under the wallpaper only causes it to pop up elsewhere. A similar thing happens with anger or any other emotion that might be suppressed in a conflict; it's hard to keep it from manifesting in other areas of your life, including your primary/romantic relationship, at home, or in your community.

- *Tarnished reputation.* Bands that are renowned for their infighting don't make good candidates for major record label recording deals. Constant conflict signals that a band is probably difficult to deal with, full stop, and in a buyer's market it's easier to bypass troubled acts in favour of others that have their poop in a group, to coin a phrase. Bands with "revolving door syndrome" due to frequent personnel changes can also find it very difficult to attract or retain new members.
- *Limited (or failed) careers.* Left unmanaged or unresolved, conflict can also spell the end of an entire career: the breakup of Oasis, the Smiths, or The Beatles (among countless others) comes to mind. Even the loss of a single member due to conflict can bring about a permanent change in a group's musical chemistry and, with it, the end of the collective creative DNA that made the band so special.
- *Disappointed fans and clients.* There's only so much that even the most rabid fan will tolerate; eventually they will move on and find another artist to follow, whether or not the band breaks up. If the creative output suffers as a result of conflict, that's another reason fans might abandon their favourite artists. The same is true for organizations: customers and clients will find another firm to do business with if the conflict affects the quality of their product or

service.

- *Threats to safety.* If things get bad enough and all civility breaks down, personal safety and security can be a casualty of conflict. Violence is not unknown in the music industry and, as outlined previously in the Brief History of Conflict section, it can happen onstage as well as off.

Clearly, unresolved or poorly managed conflict will cost you money, time, relationships, and, perhaps worst of all for everyone, great music. Remember, it doesn't have to be this way. If you deal with conflict as soon as you notice there is a problem, your chances are better than average that matters will be resolved successfully. This means that the situation won't get worse, you will save yourself lots of stress and anxiety, and the music will continue.

Another very important thing will happen when conflict is dealt with early on: your fellow musicians (and other cool, like-minded people) will learn from the experience and grow. Best of all, on a personal level, you will get better at preventing conflict and at handling it positively and productively when it does occur. Like any other skill—including writing or playing music—conflict resolution gets better with practice. Eventually you will begin to be known for your leadership skills in this area, and you will develop a reputation in the industry as someone who is pleasant to work with. Given the choice between a musician with excellent chops but no people skills and a musician with less than perfect musicianship but lots of leadership skills, most people would prefer to work with the latter. And what musician doesn't want more opportunities?

Now you know why you will want to address conflict as soon as you realize something is amiss: the costs of not doing so are obvious, and far too high.

Next, we'll take a look at some of the signs that will tell

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you it is time to act.