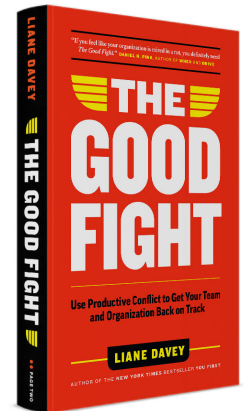


# The Good Fight

Use Productive Conflict to Get Your Team and Organization Back on Track

by **Liane Davey**



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## THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

In *The Good Fight*, Liane Davey teaches managers, employees, and people from all backgrounds about the power of positive conflict. The truth is that conflict can actually make our teams, our decisions, our execution, and our results better—as long as it’s managed correctly. Avoiding conflict and disagreement can actually devastate our businesses and our relationships, holding us back when positive conflict could be pushing us forward. That said, not all conflict is good conflict. To discover which fights are worth having, it’s important to identify the mechanics of what makes conflict productive—and what makes it unproductive.

In order to create an environment where positive conflict can thrive, we can’t just rely on our instincts. We need to create, execute, and refine a system for conflict that makes it a clearly defined part of how we work. If we can do that, we’ll be rewarded with conflict that builds momentum, trust, and success, rather than tearing them down.

## IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why conflict in business can be a good thing, and why avoiding difficult conversations can hold businesses back.
- The mechanics of productive conflict, including how to proactively establish communication and build trust.
- How to systematize conflict, so it becomes a natural part of how you work.
- How to apply productive conflict skills to your most important relationships in work and life.

## Introduction

Productive conflict makes businesses more profitable and more innovative. It makes their teams more trusting and helps them enjoy the work they do more than ever. Finally, it makes our lives more rewarding and less stressful.

Avoiding tough discussions and decisions holds businesses back, making teams dysfunctional and causing stress. A gap is created when we avoid contentious issues that need to be resolved. But when you foster productive conflict, you can proactively establish a line of communication and build trust with your colleagues. You just need to learn the techniques to create a strong connection that turns colleagues into adversaries.

In this summary, we'll find practical strategies to short-circuit unproductive or adversarial conflict and start to contribute to a solution, realizing along the way that it's possible to prevent the majority of conflicts and make those you can't prevent more productive and less aversive. Finally, we'll learn how to systematize conflict so that it can become a natural and empowering part of the way we all work.

### Conflict Debt

Conflict debt is the sum of all the contentious issues that need to be addressed to be able to move forward but instead remain undiscussed and unresolved. Conflict debt can be as simple as withholding the feedback that would allow your colleague to do a better job and as profound as continually deferring a strategic decision while getting further and further behind the competition.

As with financial debt, conflict debt starts off innocently. An issue comes up that's a little too hot to handle, so you defer it. You promise yourself that you'll revisit it when things are less busy, or when cooler heads prevail. You buy yourself time and space. But days pass, and no spontaneous resolution materializes. Instead, the issue becomes more contentious and the factions more entrenched. Suddenly, you're in conflict debt.

Avoiding interpersonal conflict hampers teamwork. Managers who fail to deal with team members who have insufficient skills or destructive behaviors set up a conflict debt that affects every member of the team.

### Conflict Aversion and Avoidance

Conflict aversion is a general unease with the thought of getting into a disagreement. It starts when you're young

and can stay with you your whole life. As humans, we're wired to dislike conflict, having evolved to get along with others as a means of staying safe. As children we were encouraged by influential adults to avoid conflict because being disagreeable was considered bad manners. Now, in the workforce, we're encouraged to go along and get along. Those who violate this norm are often given critical feedback and labeled as poor team players.

But in fact, conflict is a natural part of healthy relationships and a critical defense against unhealthy ones. While conflict aversion is normal, it's important that it not turn into conflict avoidance. Disliking conflict will not hurt us, but disavowing it entirely certainly will.

## The New Conflict Mindset

Overcoming conflict avoidance requires a new mindset. We need to tune out the naysayers and focus on the positive outcomes that we'll achieve when we work through our conflicts. Although delivering difficult messages might not feel nice in the moment, in the long run, telling someone what they need to hear is often the kindest thing we can do. Rather than remaining a bystander to conflict, weigh in to help those in the thick of the argument solve their problem more objectively.

Don't fear emotion; think of it as a valuable clue that something important is wrong. Calmly and kindly draw out the person to rectify the underlying issues. Disagree with your boss when adding a different view will contribute to a better decision. Speak deliberately and respectfully, and leave a way to backtrack if necessary.

## The Conflict Code

In exploring the conflict code, we'll focus on what you can do to prevent the majority of conflicts and make the rest more productive and less aversive. You'll learn how you can proactively establish a line of communication and build trust with your colleagues. Next, you'll see the techniques you can use to create a strong connection that turns adversaries into allies. Finally, you'll get practical strategies for diverting adversarial conflict and constructively developing a solution, through communication, connection, and contribution.

### Establish a Line of Communication

Conflicts often arise because we act without a clear understanding of what's expected of us. It's important to establish

a line of communication and to build trust, with your boss, your teammates, and your colleagues in other departments, before there is an issue to address.

To build trust, create a connection that allows your colleagues to understand you as a person. The more predictable they find your behavior, the more they will trust you. Earn credibility even before you have a track record by asking good questions and demonstrating how you will tackle your work. Demonstrate reliability and show your colleagues that you will prioritize their needs. Ooze integrity by being transparent, especially if you are struggling.

Actively strengthen your trust in your colleagues by behaving as though you trust them, even before you really do.

### Create a Connection

Making the effort to create a strong connection with a person will allow you to problem-solve as allies rather than fight as adversaries. When a discussion gets heated, the facts and information presented provide excellent clues about what is important to the players. Pay attention to what is (and isn't) said to zero in on what's at stake.

Explore the feelings and emotions the person is signaling with their body language. When emotions are present, it's likely that there are more substantive issues you haven't exposed yet. Use questions and observations to uncover the values and beliefs that underlie their position. It's these values and beliefs that will unlock the solution to the conflict.

Regardless of whether or not you agree with the person, validate what they are saying and ensure they feel heard and understood. Use everything at your disposal to strengthen the connection you have with the other person, including your physical situation, your language and tone, and your body language.

### Contribute to a Solution

Once you've established a line of communication and created a strong connection, you are in a good position to contribute to a solution. Use the Two Truths strategy to validate the other person's priorities while adding your own. Assume that both opposing opinions are right in their own way, then work toward a solution that solves for both.

Next, use the Root Cause approach to demonstrate alignment on the problem when you want to offer alternate solutions. Show that you agree on the underlying cause of the problem, even if your proposed solutions differ. Rather than contradicting or criticizing a flawed solution, expose

the risks of their plan by showing its potential impact, then redirect the person toward a feasible solution.

Use the Hypothetical technique to overcome resistance by asking the person to imagine the benefits of a plan before solving for the obstacles.

When you have multiple stakeholders with competing interests, use the Common Criteria approach to get everyone aligned on what a good solution would look like. This is a powerful step towards finding common ground on a solution you can all move forward with.

When all else fails, Own the Misunderstanding and use enough clarifying questions to figure out which approach would help resolve the issue.

### Codifying Conflict

The Conflict Code—establishing a line of communication, creating a strong connection, and contributing to a solution—definitely works. It just takes a lot of effort. If you had to go through that process for every single conflict in your organization, you'd be exhausted. In the next segment, we'll focus on what you can do to systematize conflict by setting expectations for everyone on your team. Then we'll work through a process to normalize the tensions that, if left unlabeled, can turn into unhealthy conflicts. Finally, we'll talk about how you can create a healthy conflict habit that increases the frequency and decreases the impact of conflict until you hardly notice it at all.

In this section, we'll dive into the processes and tools you can use to get your team out of conflict debt. This is where you'll learn the secrets of how teams systematize conflict so that it takes less toll on the people in your organization or team.

### Clarify Expectations

Failing to set clear expectations will lead to subpar work and inefficient rework, which creates frustration and conflict for all involved. You can neutralize conflict by articulating what's expected at different levels of your department and when that value needs to be added. This will help you get value you need from your boss, while heading off unpleasant micromanagement and deep dives.

Your team will have greater focus on your unique value and the activities that are most valuable for your business. Working through this process with your direct reports will allow you to raise the bar, while setting the expectation that you will challenge, critique, and improve your team's work, even when they do a great job.

### Normalize Tension

Tensions are a natural part of cross-functional teams, but many people misinterpret tension as contrary to teamwork. Failing to recognize the value of different and opposing perspectives and priorities on a team can set up unproductive conflict.

You can help normalize productive conflict by articulating what's expected of different roles and how those roles will often be in tension with one another. You can use this method to coach team members who are under- or over-contributing and address the imbalance caused by having a mix of multi-incumbent and single-incumbent roles on your team.

Discuss the implications of making trade-offs between team members to reduce the friction caused by win/lose scenarios. Make use of effective goal setting to proactively manage the interdependencies on your team.

### The Conflict Habit

The best way to keep conflict productive is to make small, frequent disagreements part of your daily habits. Begin to sprinkle a little conflict to help your teammates develop a taste for it. Invest time up front in clarifying expectations whenever you face a new task, a new project, or a new role. Make dissent more normal by adding tension to even the most routine conversations. Get more skilled at delivering feedback to help your colleagues understand the unintended impact of their behavior. And, when appropriate, use humor and code words to keep difficult discussions light and to avoid triggering defensiveness.

Set clear expectations for how meetings will support productive conflict, and use the start and close of your meetings to reinforce those expectations.

### Conclusion

Organizations dole out a steady stream of conflicts, from agonizing strategic trade-offs to petty interpersonal squabbles. You need to work through these issues to keep operations running smoothly. Giving in to conflict aversion and letting issues pile up will lead to conflict debt that stalls your organization, sabotages your team, and stresses you out.

Instead, fight the good fight. Make the effort to establish effective lines of communication and build strong connections with your colleagues. Contribute in creative ways to come to solutions that, if not perfect for everyone, are at least the best choice given your constraints. You deserve to work on a team where productive conflict supports great decisions, strong relationships, and a positive working environment. Now you know fighting the good fight will give you the team you deserve.



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