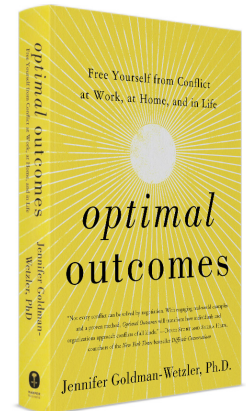


Optimal Outcomes

Free Yourself from Conflict at Work,
at Home, and in Life

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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Where can you turn when your attempts to resolve conflict fail? Most approaches emphasize collaboration. You are supposed to sit down, calmly talk through your differences, and find a solution. But what if nothing seems to work, no matter what you do?

Optimal Outcomes reveals eight groundbreaking practices proven to help people everywhere free themselves from conflict. When situations resist resolution, the Optimal Outcomes Method teaches us conflict *freedom*. Dr. Goldman-Wetzler's innovative method blends mindfulness, Jungian psychology, and practical, step-by-step advice to free anyone from seemingly impossible conflict.

You'll learn to observe complex situations with clarity, access your shadow values, and take bold, simple, surprising action. Applying the practices, you'll reach your Optimal Outcome—which may be vastly different from what you originally imagined but more satisfying than you ever dreamed possible.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The four habits that keep us stuck in the conflict loop and the eight practices that help us get out of it.
- To map out conflict and put your emotions to work for you.
- To imagine your Ideal Future and design a pattern-breaking path.
- To overcome hesitation and identify your Optimal Outcome.

PART I: UNDERSTANDING THE CONFLICT LOOP

Introduction

Conflict is a natural, normal, healthy part of everyday life. Conflict can also be productive and lead to innovative solutions.

For instance, diverse teams, in which team members engage in conflict as a result of naturally arising differing perspectives, have been found to be more creative, innovative, and productive than teams in which everyone looks, sounds, and thinks alike.

Interesting plot lines in books, plays, and movies—and to some degree life itself—depend on the protagonist facing an inner or outer conflict and learning how to overcome it. Think of the main characters in the world’s best-known pieces of literature, from Gilgamesh to Moses, from Mohammed to the Buddha, all of whom face and overcome gargantuan conflicts—both inside themselves and with others.

Some conflict—a healthy amount of it—is and should remain part of a well-functioning life, team, organization, or society. However, conflict that returns no matter how many times you try to resolve it tends not to contribute to your health and growth. Instead, it makes it hard to enjoy life or achieve your goals.

The Conflict Loop and the Optimal Outcomes Method

When we experience conflict with someone else, we tend to think, feel, and act in ways that cause more conflict, which leads to thoughts, feelings, and actions that cause more conflict, and so on. Conflict recurrence is the nature of the beast. This is called the conflict loop.

When you’re stuck in a conflict loop, you develop conflict habits, including blaming or avoiding others, blaming yourself, and relentlessly seeking “win-win” solutions even when other people refuse to cooperate. And your conflict habits interact with other people’s conflict habits to form a pattern of interaction that keeps you stuck in the conflict loop.

The Optimal Outcomes Method is a set of eight practices you can use to free yourself from the habits and patterns that reinforce the conflict loop. Breaking free from a conflict loop can be challenging. The habits and patterns that reinforce it have a strong inward pull. In order to break free, you’ll need a force from outside the loop to pull you out.

The Optimal Outcome is that force. The following eight practices will help you to create it to pull you away from the conflict loop and toward freedom.

Practice 1: Notice Your Conflict Habits and Patterns

Our conflict habits arise based on how we have been conditioned or taught to approach the world. What we learn from parents and other family members, teachers, sports coaches, religious clergy, and other influential people in our lives has a strong influence on our conflict habits.

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

There are four conflict habits that, despite our best intentions, keep us stuck in patterns that perpetuate the conflict loop. 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.

Blame others. People with this pattern may lean on their competitive spirit too heavily, to the point where it gets warped into blaming and attacking others. 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.

Shut down. 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.

Shame yourself. 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

Conflicts are typically caused by multiple factors, but our tendency is to view the situation in much simpler terms.

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.

Relentlessly collaborate. 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.

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.

PART II: BREAKING THE CONFLICT PATTERN

Practice 2: Increase Clarity and Complexity: Map Out the Conflict

Conflicts are typically caused by multiple factors, but our tendency is to view the situation in much simpler terms. This inclination to simplify into narrow "us-versus-them" affairs stems from the fight-or-flight instinct, which restricts our focus in the face of danger. When a tiger is charging you, the tiger is all you can afford to pay attention to. Even if you understand that a situation is complicated, your mind seeks rapid clarity so you can take quick action.

When you take a step back and use a wide-angle lens, you gain a more complex and nuanced understanding of a situation that previously seemed black and white. This allows you to identify levers for change that were impossible to see before and develop approaches to the conflict that are different from when you were looking at the situation in a simpler way. One of the best ways to widen your perspec-

tive is to map out the conflict.

Sometimes the primary benefit of mapping the conflict is that it broadens your perspective. Other times, the benefit is the exact opposite: Mapping clarifies, even crystallizes, your perspective.

Map Your Situation

The following mapping process is informed by Dr. Peter T. Coleman, director of the Morton Deutsch International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution at Columbia and founder of the Advanced Consortium on Cooperation, Conflict, and Complexity at Columbia University's Earth Institute.

In the middle of a large blank page, write down the names of the people or groups involved in a conflict. This conflict should be something that directly impacts you, that you or someone else has tried to resolve and failed, and for which you can do something to help.

Now add as many people, places, events, ideas, and other factors to the map as you can. Pay particular attention to include people, places, events, ideas, and other factors that might not have been obvious to you before. They can be factors from the past, that are occurring today, or that you anticipate may influence the situation in the future.

Then draw circles and lines to show how all the factors are connected. Be sure to put at least one new person or aspect of the situation on your map that you didn't consider relevant before. Draw or write anything on your map that will help you understand the situation better.

For example, thick arrows can denote exertion of pressure or influence or simply strong relationships. You can use different colors to represent the feelings you get from different people or groups of people. Or you can add shapes, colors, pictures, or words inside each circle to represent the meaning a person, place, event, idea, or factor holds for you.

Now take a look at your map. What story does it tell? Mapping your situation can give you some new insight, at least enough to create even a small break in the conflict loop.

Practice 3: Put Your Emotions to Work for You

In order to understand someone else's emotional experience, you must first identify and understand your own. If you don't, you risk projecting your own emotions onto other people or, equally as problematic, taking on their emotions as if they were your own. Doing either of these things can make it difficult to respond to others in a truly helpful way.

Depending on how we experience and express our emotions in any given situation, all of us, at one time or another, become vulnerable to each of three emotion traps.

When you fall into the **Knee-Jerk Reaction Trap**, you express a quick reaction based on your emotional experience.

When you fall into the **Inaccessible Emotions Trap**, your emotions exist inside of you, but they remain inaccessible to others and often even to yourself.

In the **Lurking Emotions Trap**, emotions tend to be hidden but lurking, lying in wait to emerge. It is the nature of emotions to be expressed. When we do not consciously express them, they often materialize anyway, in ways we don't intend.

Practice pausing. When you have the presence of mind to notice as you're falling into one of the traps, you have the opportunity to take a reactive pause. Instead of reacting to other people, you simply stop and take a short break. You can do this in your head or out loud. You can use proactive pause time to acknowledge and name your emotions.

Let your emotions settle. Once you acknowledge your emotions, what should you do? The well-known Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh offers the metaphor of a muddy glass of water when you're in the desert: You want to drink the water, but it's clouded with mud. What to do?

You let the dirt settle to the bottom, so you can drink the clear water. It's the same with emotions, Hanh says. Don't try to throw away, change, or examine the muddy emotions—just let them settle, and see what happens. Usually something else more constructive appears in their place.

Ask what your emotions are trying to tell you. Get to know your emotions as if they're old friends who have come to visit you. What do your emotions look, sound, feel, and even smell like? Try talking to them.

If you feel silly doing this in public, do it inside your head or find a quiet place to be alone and say something like

“Hello, fear. What are you trying to tell me?” Then listen for an answer.

Take constructive, pattern-breaking action. Once you acknowledge your emotions and listen to what they're trying to tell you, then it's time to take constructive action. When you feel angry, consider how an American civil rights icon handled anger.

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., acknowledged his anger and used it as a catalyst for social change. That broke the patterns of interaction in the United States at the time, when people were expressing their anger about lack of civil rights either violently or not at all.

Instead, King took constructive, pattern-breaking action. He articulated the impact of injustice on his people: “Our civil rights have been violated.” He committed himself to the cause of justice. And he made a clear request of every American: to treat all people equally.

Anger—or any other emotion—is not inherently bad. It's what you do with it that can cause it to become a catalyst for either constructive change or destruction. It's up to you.

Practice 4: Honor Ideal and Shadow Values—Yours and Theirs

Over the course of a lifetime, each of us develops a unique values fingerprint. Unlike our actual fingerprints, our values fingerprint is not fixed. It evolves based on our life experiences and our responses to the values we learn from the people around us.

We learn some values explicitly. If you grew up in a religious home, your parents may have taught you the value of caring for others by quoting the biblical phrase “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Other values are instilled implicitly, without any discussion. With implicitly learned values, we may not always be aware of how important they are to us and why. We may also lack clarity about our values because we've pushed some of them out of our consciousness. With a nod to Carl Jung's notion of the shadow self, these can be called shadow values.

Unlike ideal values, which we're proud to hold openly, shadow values are hard for us to admit, even to ourselves. Because we're in denial about them, we're often unaware that they are leading us to speak and act in ways that exacerbate conflicts. We are typically reluctant to admit to our

shadow values because we are ashamed of them.

The ironic thing is that shadow values differ widely from person to person, and a value that might seem obviously “good” or ideal to one person can be a shadow value for someone else.

Identify Your Ideal Values

To help you break the conflict pattern of the past in whatever situation you’re struggling with, you first need to identify your values. Ideal values are simply the things you are proud to say you care about, such as autonomy or collaboration.

Now search for your shadow values. Think of what you value but are not comfortable *saying* you value. If you’re stumped, take a moment to think about a time when you may have felt wrongly accused. If you haven’t been owning a shadow value, it is still there; it’s just stuffed deep down inside.

Noticing the tensions between our own values is key to freeing ourselves from conflict with other people. Those inner tensions often prevent us from being clear about what we want in any given situation, which makes it impossible to be clear with others.

We are typically reluctant to admit to our shadow values because we are ashamed of them.

Honor Your Shadow Values

Honoring a shadow value means to think, speak, or take action in a way that acknowledges its presence. Doing this helps bring the value into conscious awareness, where it can be properly addressed.

Once you’ve noticed the tensions between your own ideal and shadow values, choose to honor one shadow value of yours that seems most relevant to your situation. First, seek to understand why it became a shadow value for you. Was it implicitly impressed upon you, so you haven’t been fully

aware of it? What messages did you receive at some point in life that might have led you to suppress it?

Honoring other people’s values means to think, speak, or take action in a way that acknowledges their values and their right to hold them (even though you may not like or agree with those values). One practical reason to do this is that doing the opposite—trying to convince others that their values are wrong—tends not to work.

Take a moment to try to identify others’ values now. This exercise offers a powerful way to develop empathy for others by suggesting possibilities about their perspectives and behavior that you haven’t yet considered.

PART III: FREEING YOURSELF FROM THE LOOP

Practice 5: Imagine Your Ideal Future

It’s finally time to learn how to exit the conflict loop. There are two forces that will help you do this. You can be pushed out of the loop from the inside, or you can be pulled out of the loop from the outside. In the case of a well-worn conflict loop, you’ll need to do both.

The force from the outside that you’ll need to pull you out of the conflict loop is your Optimal Outcome. But since we haven’t yet determined exactly what your Optimal Outcome is, we’ll need to start with something simpler: a prototype of it.

This prototype of your Optimal Outcome can be called your Ideal Future; it is the “beta version” of what will become your Optimal Outcome.

One of the reasons that some conflict situations resist resolution is that we are so focused on what happened in the past and on who is to blame that we don’t consider what we would like to happen in the future. We’re stuck for reasons that go beyond rational thinking and problem solving. In fact, complex problems involving challenging emotions and deeply held values are typically resistant to rationally derived solutions.

For this reason, do not put on your brainstorming or problem-solving hat. Use your imagination instead. For now, your job is to imagine in as much detail as possible the future you desire for yourself.

Use All of Your Senses

To gain clarity about your Ideal Future, using all five of your senses and generating the emotions you would like to

experience in the future, imagine what it would look, sound, taste, smell, and feel like (tactilely and emotionally) to be in that future state. Your job is to do this until it seems as if you are experiencing the future before it arrives.

At the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963, to demand civil rights for African Americans, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. drew upon the five senses and emotions to help us imagine the Ideal Future he wanted to create.

This is a powerful practice because the imagined future registers at a different level of our awareness from the intellectual one. We see, hear, feel, touch, and taste the Ideal Future because King not only paints a picture of it but also creates a song, a feel, a touch, and even a taste to it. He uses words to help us imagine the future he would like to create.

For example, he says, “Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.” By describing how the ground will feel beneath our feet, moving from “quicksands” to “solid rock,” he distinguishes between where we are now and where he wants us to be.

When he says, “I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood,” he whets our appetite to taste the food at the feast of fellowship in his Ideal Future.

Now, there is a fine line between a successful “I Have a Dream” speech about a future that inspires you and a pipe dream. The line can sometimes be tough to distinguish. But the only way to distinguish one from the other is to gain clarity about what you’re shooting for in the first place.

For now, your work is simply to imagine an Ideal Future without worrying about how feasible it is. We’ll come to that work soon enough.

Practice 6: Design a Pattern-Breaking Path

In Practice 5, you imagined what you’d like to happen in the future; now it’s time to plan how you will get there—what you will actually do to turn your imagined future into reality.

A Pattern-Breaking Path (PBP) is a linked yet simple set of action steps to help you exit the conflict loop and move toward your imagined Ideal Future. Successful paths have three characteristics: they involve doing something surprisingly different from what has been done before; they’re simple; and

each action step builds on the one that comes before it.

Let’s think about how you will design the steps in your Pattern-Breaking Path.

Step one: Start with yourself. The best way to free yourself is to begin by directing your attention within. Your actions in step one may be so subtle that only you are aware of them. For example, you might incorporate a three-minute pause practice into your daily routine. You may spend your pause time imagining your Ideal Future in detail until you are ready to talk about it with others.

Step two: Connect with one person. In step two, consider how to involve one person from your conflict map. This may not always be the most obvious other person on your map. It might be someone on your map with whom you already have a trusting relationship or someone you suspect could be helpful to you.

You might ask them out for coffee (or a beer!) to hear more about their perspective and to share your Ideal Future with them. Or you might make a phone call to apologize to someone or simply to say hello. Remember to keep your actions simple and pattern-breaking.

Step three: Involve a small group. In step three, think about whether or how you might involve more people from your conflict map. If appropriate to your situation, maybe you could host a meeting, video chat, or phone call in which you seek to engage with, and gather new ideas and support from, other people on your map.

Step four: Involve larger groups of people. In step four, if appropriate, you may now be ready to bring together a larger group of people who have not been seeing eye to eye. For example, one client held a meeting between the people on his research team and the people on the sales team who have not been getting along to discuss ways to collaborate more effectively.

Steps five and beyond: Extend the work. Steps five and beyond may be made up of a series of one-on-one conversations or group experiences meant to support and extend the work you did in the previous steps.

Your imagined future plus your Pattern-Breaking Path provide the pull and the push you’ll need to exit the conflict loop.

Practice 7: Test Your Path

No matter how positive our intent, when designing a PBP,

Like theater directors, we script out scenes to bring about our Ideal Future—and then we're caught off guard when the actors go off book.

we often miscalculate the effect of our overtures. Like theater directors, we script out scenes to bring about our Ideal Future—and then we're caught off guard when the actors go off book. The trouble is that our own (starring) role is the only one we've properly fleshed out.

To prevent this, think about how your Pattern-Breaking Path might play out in the future. Consider not only how your own actions (or inactions) will affect yourself today, but also how your actions (or inactions) may impact the other people you identified on your conflict map in Practice 2, now and in the future.

Once you've anticipated any possible unintended consequences of your actions, find ways to mitigate them. You can do this in two ways: You can work to *prevent* unintended consequences from happening in the first place, and you can *prepare* for how to respond if, despite your efforts, unintended consequences do occur.

Conduct Mini-Experiments

It is often best to test our hypotheses in the lab before testing them in the real world. Your lab can be any place in which you'd feel safe making a mistake.

The defining feature of your "lab" is the people you choose to be in it: ideally, people who care about you and who will forgive you if your experiments don't turn out the way you intend. Your lab is for conducting small experiments in a safe environment, not grand ones.

For example, if your PBP involves voicing an unpopular opinion to your boss, first practice by voicing an unpopular opinion to a friend—someone who will forgive you if your words don't come out exactly the way you intend.

Notice the results of your experiment: How does your friend respond? Are your words helpful or not? How can you improve for next time?

When you conduct mini-experiments, you will gain two things: practice and immediate feedback. If you've got the luxury of having enough time to practice, you can flex your "muscles" by trying new behaviors and even develop the

"muscle memory" needed to change ingrained habits.

You'll also learn about the impact of your behavior—how others receive it. You can use that feedback to refine your approach in the situation where it matters most.

Practice 8: Choose an Optimal Outcome

You may be excited to pursue your Ideal Future and Pattern-Breaking Path, but if you're like many people, you may still feel hesitant. Making a change in your behavior, which your PBP will naturally require you to do, can seem daunting, even scary.

There are four common sources of hesitation. Though each of them is slightly different, they all serve one purpose: to keep you safely within your comfort zone. Unfortunately, staying in your comfort zone keeps you stuck in the conflict loop, which prevents you from achieving an Optimal Outcome.

- Your Ideal Future is not possible, but you fantasize about it anyway.
- Your Walk-Away Alternative is unfeasible, but you fantasize about it anyway. A Walk-Away Alternative is any scenario you can imagine to free yourself from conflict that involves walking away from, or ending a relationship with, people in your situation.
- Your Walk-Away Alternative seems unfeasible, but it's better than your Ideal Future.
- By far the most common reason we hesitate is that the prospect of changing our behavior to pursue an Ideal Future is intimidating or, in many cases, downright terrifying.

Identify Your Optimal Outcome

To identify your Optimal Outcome, assess the feasibility of your Ideal Future, Staying in Conflict, and any Walk-Away Alternatives. Compare the costs and benefits of all the feasible options with one another. The feasible option with the lowest costs and greatest benefits is your Optimal Outcome.

It is important to note that choosing to pursue an Optimal Outcome does not necessarily preclude you from exploring other options later. But if you want to free yourself from conflict, you do need to choose one option to begin with.

If your Ideal Future emerges as the lowest-cost, highest-benefit option, choose it and refer to it by its proper name: your Optimal Outcome.

If an unfeasible Walk-Away Alternative has been distracting you from your Ideal Future, let the unfeasible fantasy go. Clinging to a fantasy about an unfeasible Walk-Away Alternative is, in effect, the same as choosing to stay stuck in conflict, even if you don't consciously realize that's what you're doing.

So face the hard truths of reality, and let go of your unfeasible Walk-Away Alternative so you can become free by taking a different, more viable path.

If a Walk-Away Alternative is less costly than your Ideal Future, recognize it as your Optimal Outcome. By doing so, you can free yourself from conflict in a way that may happily surprise you.

If you can find ways to lower the costs of any of your options, revise them. Redesign your Pattern-Breaking Path to reflect a revised Optimal Outcome. If you revise any of your options, you will need to update your Pattern-Breaking Path to reflect the changes.

Be Courageous

If you have found your Optimal Outcome and you're still hesitating, remember that your discomfort is totally normal. In fact, if you didn't experience some discomfort

at the thought of taking pattern-breaking action, that would be strange. We human beings naturally experience discomfort when we so much as think about breaking the patterns of the past.

It is not only the discomfort of making change that can be difficult; it is the fear of change itself. But because fear is a natural part of being human, it is not realistic to try to get rid of it. Instead, the best way to deal with fear of change is to muster your courage. As Nelson Mandela put it, "I learned that courage was not the absence of fear but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid but he who conquers that fear."

He also said, "For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others." Your actions are a contagious form of leadership; when you free yourself from conflict, you help free others as well.

IF YOU LIKED THIS SUMMARY, YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE:

- *How to Lead When Your Boss Can't (or Won't)* by John C. Maxwell
- *Leading the Unleadable: How to Manage Mavericks, Cynics, Divas, and Other Difficult People* by Alan Willet



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