

# Search Beneath the Surface for Hidden Meaning

**Book: Resolving Conflicts at Work**

**Author: Kenneth Cloke and Joan Goldsmith**

What do you “see” in your mind’s eye when you imagine searching beneath the surface? Unveiling family antiques? Digging for buried treasure? Whatever your visions are, a likely aspect is that it holds the expectation of finding a precious gift or obtaining a longed-for desire.

In Path Four of *Resolving Conflicts at Work* (2000), authors Cloke and Goldsmith equate resolving conflict to unearthing an archeological treasure, carefully removing layers of dirt and historical debris, or viewing an iceberg, only the top of which is visible from the water’s surface. Conflict, like the iceberg and most of our communication, hides much more than is first revealed (p. 112).

As conflicts emerge, they often dominate communication, which have little connection to the real issues below the surface. Cloke and Goldsmith remind us that in conflict “what is at stake is our capacity for mutual respect, integrity, inner truth, and honest relationships with others” (p. 113) and not the trivial issue that ignites the conflict. Cloke and Goldsmith created an “Iceberg of Conflict” to describe what is beneath the surface in a conflict:



If you consider a conflict you are now experiencing or one from the past that is still clear to you, Cloke and Goldsmith suggest asking yourself the following questions, from your perspective and that of the person with whom you are or were in conflict (p. 115):

- *Issues.* What issues appear on the surface?
- *Personalities.* Are personality differences contributing to misunderstandings and tension? If so, can you identify them and understand how they operate?
- *Emotions.* What emotions are contributing to your reactions? What is their impact? Do you think you are communicating your emotions responsibly or suppressing them?
- *Interests, needs, desires.* Have you proposed a solution to the conflict? What deep concerns are driving the conflict? What are your interests, needs, and desires, and why are they important?
- *Self-perceptions and self-esteem.* How do you feel about yourself and your behaviors as you continue the conflict? What do you identify as your strengths and weaknesses?
- *Hidden expectations.* What are your primary expectations and those of your opponent? Have you clearly communicated your expectations? What would happen if you did? How might you let go of false expectations?
- *Unresolved issues from the past.* Does this conflict revisit elements from past relationships?

Having made your best attempt at answering the questions, has your understanding of the conflict changed? Have you shared any of this information with the other person? If not, why not? Are you concerned the other person will not listen, is uninterested in the information, or is untrustworthy? Or, have you held back because of risks that you perceive, perhaps reactions that will cause you greater hurt (p. 116)?

The problem with holding back or covering up is that, ultimately, you deprive yourself of authentic communication with the other person, who may be as tense and fearful as you are. How will the other person start to listen, if you don't offer new information? Even if the other person does not accept your offer to participate in authentic communication, at least you will feel better for having made an honest attempt and for acting with integrity (p. 117).

You may be asking yourself, "How do I get beneath the surface?" This may be particularly difficult in situations—perhaps at work—in which there seems to be an unspoken "web of silence and collusion" (p. 118). Cloke and Goldsmith offer these suggestions for unearthing that which is beneath the surface in a conflict (p. 119):

- *Focus on yourself.* It's important that you come to understand your personal iceberg.
- *Be curious.* Open-ended questions and empathic listening help as you probe the depths.
- *Take a risk.* Probe for that deep level of honesty within yourself, realizing that greater self-honesty will allow and impel you to be more honest with others.
- *Be accepting.* Be willing to accept new understandings without shame, anger, or judgment.

Once you have probed and accepted new understandings within yourself, you will gain higher levels of self-confidence that will serve you well as you take the next step: asking questions of the other party to the conflict, so you can both address subsurface issues. Draw from your curiosity and genuine desire to come to resolution. At the same time, your questions will be most openly received if you "ask permission, use a gentle, respectful, empathic approach, and listen nonjudgmentally" (p. 119).

What questions should you ask? Here are some examples that might work for you (p. 120):

- "Can you tell me more about what bothers you about what I did?"
- "How did you feel when I did that?"
- "Would you like to know how that made me feel?"
- "Why is that a problem for you?"
- "What did you mean when you said \_\_\_\_\_"?
- "What is most important to you in solving this problem?"

- “What would you suggest I do to contribute to the resolution?”
- “Can you think of any solutions that might be acceptable for both of us?”
- “What would it take for you to let go of this conflict and feel we have resolved the issue?”
- “Would you care to hear how I would like for you to communicate with me?”
- “What kind of relationship would you like for us to have?”

In a recent FDR summary article, you read about honesty and empathy, which are closely intertwined with the process of searching below the surface. The tension between honesty and empathy is potent within a conflict, and skill and practice are necessary to successfully balance the two. Although often challenging to do, the concept of honesty is not difficult to understand. In contrast, empathy (not sympathy) may be a harder concept to grasp. As an empathic person, you will need to hold two seemingly opposing ideas at the same time (p. 123):

1. Realize that the other person is unique, with ideas, experiences, and emotions you can never fully know; and
2. Imagine walking the other person’s path, to try to understand the other person’s ideas, experiences, and emotions.

You may have an idea as to how you found yourself embroiled in a particular conflict, and, of course, it’s usually easier to place blame on others. The reality is, you do not find yourself deep in conflict unless you have actively or passively contributed to it. Giving it more thought, you can no doubt identify many of the “shoulds” and “should nots” that both of you could have done to prevent the conflict. In the end, taking responsibility for our lives, asking serious questions, and requesting feedback allow us to “stand up for ourselves and at the same time for others” (p. 133).

The final question is, “How do I take responsibility for the conflict, acknowledge my contribution to it, and encourage responsibility and honesty (above and below the surface) within myself and others?” Cloke and Goldsmith offer several steps you can take toward this end (p. 134):

- Start with an honest self-appraisal, to identify your contribution to the conflict.
- Listen to comments from others, but do not take them personally.
- Maintain honesty in all of your communication.
- Listen to the honest comments of others, and acknowledge those responses.
- Be willing to reassess and change your position.
- Openly discuss covert behaviors, including those that you have fostered or allowed.
- No longer engage in covert behavior of your own.
- Assist others as they learn to communicate more honestly.
- Find ways to reconnect with others.
- Find forms of honest expression that allow others to save face.
- Discontinue judgmental descriptions of the character and behaviors of others.
- Bring to the surface alternative ways for both of you to achieve personal goals and desires.

Cloke and Goldsmith conclude Path Four of *Resolving Conflicts at Work* with these encouraging words:

By taking not just 50 but 100 percent responsibility for your conflicts, you close the door to blaming others. You discover hidden opportunities to learn from your mistakes, become more skillful in future conflicts, and free yourself from the feelings and behaviors that led you to impasse. We encourage you to enjoy whatever treasures you may find along the way (p. 134).

Cloke, K. & Goldsmith, J. (2000). *Resolving Conflicts at Work*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.  
Note: *Resolving Conflicts at Work* is in the FDR library and available for loan.

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