UNDER THE HOOD

The Secret Engine That Drives Destructive Conflict

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CONFLICT IS AN UNCOMFORTABLE, YET UNAVOIDABLE PART OF EVERY WORKPLACE.

But we don't always realize the level of harm caused by the toxic behaviors that come along with it. Unproductive conflict is a measurable drag on productivity, performance, and the bottom line. Yet conflict—if done right—is integral to success. Today's struggle leads to tomorrow's breakthrough. *Under the Hood* exposes the hidden connection between our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, revealing the secret engine that drives destructive conflict in the workplace. This eBook also points to the solution with a proven methodology that's grounded in psychology and validated in the field by Authorized Partners of Everything DiSC®. This method empowers all people to put their conscious selves back in the driver's seat and productively engage in conflict.

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Destructive Behaviors Are Under the Hood

Why is there so much gossip in organizations? It's so common that we just accept it—but seriously, why? Gossip makes people look untrustworthy and two-faced. Not to mention, there's a pretty decent chance those words are going to get back to the other person and land the source on their blacklist. So why risk it?

Or why get sarcastic during an argument? It makes us look petty. And it's almost never successfully changed another person's mind. In fact, if anything, it begs them to double down. So why do it?

The truth is, most of the time, we don't even know why we do these things. Conflict brings out some pretty erratic, counter-productive, and often downright uncharacteristic behavior in us. It taps into our primal impulses in a way that few other situations can. Because our real driving motives are inaccessible in the heat of the moment, we're almost powerless to get them under control, resulting in toxic or damaging knee-jerk responses. We exaggerate or stonewall or exclude others when this is almost certainly not the type of person we consider ourselves to be—definitely not the image we want our parents, children, or mentors to have of us.

Let's take a step back. Really scrutinize these behaviors. What are the hidden but undeniable benefits they provide?

GOSSIPING: Frankly, gossiping can feel extremely rewarding in the moment. Venting our frustrations is cathartic. And because we tend to gossip with people we trust, they usually validate our opinion. Not to mention, it can be deeply satisfying to tear down someone who has hurt us. But gossip can also be about power. It helps rally people to our side. We get our perspective out into the world first and convincingly. And for people who are insecure about their status in the organization, gossiping can create a perceived sense of authority as coworkers turn to them for inside knowledge.

SARCASM: In conflict, sarcasm is a close cousin to passive-aggression. It allows us to take a shot at someone or express our hostility without being too obvious about our real motivations. We use sarcasm when we're not quite committed enough to yell at someone, but still want to take them down a peg or two. And sarcasm is such a tempting tool in the midst of conflict because we can always claim, "I'm just joking…seriously, lighten up." We may feel like the "just kidding" excuse gives us immunity after subtly attacking or demeaning someone.

STONEWALLING: When we stonewall, we make it clear to the other person that communication is completely shut down. We deliberately let them know that their behavior is so unacceptable that we are unwilling to compromise or even discuss a resolution. And although we may hate to admit it, stonewalling can be gratifying. We get to punish the other person while telling ourselves that our behavior is strong and dignified. As a bonus, we don't have to wade through the untidiness of conflict. Therefore, this can become a self-preservation strategy when we feel overwhelmed by a swirl of uncomfortable emotions.

EXAGGERATING: Sometimes a minor offense can still make us extremely upset. In fact, sometimes it's tough to justify the intensity of our emotions given the actual situation. Exaggeration is a way of making a situation sound as bad as it feels. Exaggeration is also empowering. It makes our case seem that much more powerful and defensible because it makes the other person's behavior seem that much more awful.

Of course, these behaviors are just the beginning. Maybe you're not tempted toward any of these unhealthy reactions, but you almost certainly have a go-to conflict strategy that you're not too proud of: belittling, overpowering, caving in, withdrawing, passive aggression, drama, dismissing opinions, finger-pointing, hypercriticism, on and on. The diversity of our unhealthy responses is one of the things that makes toxic conflict so hard to curb in an organization. If it always looked the same, we would have nailed down a fix by now—but we have definitely not done that. In fact, it's quite the opposite. The statistics that represent conflict's drag on efficiency and engagement are staggering.

Conflict's Drag on the Workplace

Earlier this year, we surveyed just over 12,000 employees about their experience with workplace conflict. Here's what we found:

70%

The percentage of managers and executives who said interpersonal conflict negatively impacted the efficiency of their department

13

The average number of hours managers spend per month dealing with workplace conflict

40%

The percentage of workers who said they have left a job as a direct result of unhealthy interpersonal conflict

That last number is particularly striking—two out of every five people have found the social dynamics within their organization so toxic they felt compelled to leave. That's how intolerable the conflict was for 40% of respondents!

So, how do most organizations deal with this reality? In most, the enterprise-level solution is, "Act like a professional." Maybe there are some managers who excel in emotional intelligence, who through nuance and instinct are able to craft a well-adjusted team culture. But usually, the approach to this well-recognized problem is surprisingly broad on the one hand and ad-hoc on the other. Organizations (understandably) don't want to wade into the swampy business of helping people manage their internal lives. After all, there's work to do, and we're not therapists. We simply communicate, implicitly and explicitly, that people are expected to put their emotions and insecurities aside and act like textbook adults. Just use the conflict management tools you learned in school... oh wait, schools don't teach that stuff. From your parents? No, again—most parents never learned those skills either. Right. From reality television? Oh wait, reality television is *literally* the worst place to learn about healthy conflict.

Okay, but can't we expect a grown-up to use their instincts and just know how to deal with conflict appropriately? The answer is no. Our instinctual responses to conflict—instilled through both nature and nurture—are complex, layered, and buried to the point of often feeling inscrutable. Even when we think we have a solid answer to the question, "whoa, where did that come from?!" we usually have, at best, a partial picture. There's a tremendous amount going on under the hood of our conscious selves, to which most of us have little or no access.

The Secret Engine that Drives Destructive Reponses

Let's take a minute to look at just how hidden and counter-intuitive our conflict responses can be. We'll use two examples that illustrate the complex, unexpected interplay among our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors: **emotional indulgence** and **emotional avoidance**. What they have in common is that the real motivation for our conflict response is far from the rationale we recite to ourselves.

Emotional Indulgence

Usually when we're feeling angry or disgusted or grief-stricken or guilty, we think of ourselves in a state of suffering; a state that's usually been inflected upon us in some way. These are unpleasant emotions, after all. And of course, we certainly wouldn't *choose* to be ensnared in their grip. But maybe we would. Maybe if there was something rewarding about the experience…

Westen et al. (2006), recruited a group of strong conservatives and a group of strong liberals and put them in an fMRI scanner (although not all at once, which would have been a pretty interesting study). They had both groups come up with logical arguments against their own political party. The parts of the brain that lit up

were what you would expect: those associated with higher order and executive reasoning—primarily, the prefrontal cortex. Then the researchers asked participants to generate arguments against the other side. Tellingly, there was much less activity in the prefrontal cortex. Disturbing, but probably not shocking. So what parts of the brain *were* uniquely active? One isn't a surprise: the area of the brain that processes disgust. The other, however, is a bit less expected: an area of the brain associated with pleasure. These aren't two sensations you normally associate with each other, but when you pair them together, you get an emotion with which most of us are familiar: **self-righteousness**. We take delight in the negative emotion, even though it seems like anything but delight.

Emotions can have a certain addictive quality. That's why wallowing in self-pity or stewing in anger gives us a temporary feeling of satisfaction, but then leaves us feeling worse than before. So we chase the negative emotion again to compensate, and a cognitive pattern develops. Because thoughts are so much more subtle than overt behaviors like gambling or shopping, it's extremely difficult to recognize these patterns, and it's even more difficult to stop. We go back to the emotion again and again without realizing it. After all, one of the main purposes of pleasure in our brain is to encourage the repetition of a behavior.

So for some of us, we lean into the opportunity to get upset with someone. Subconsciously, we know there's something in it for us. We're quicker to take the bait than the situation probably warrants. But even for those of us who aren't prone to getting upset, there's still that powerful temptation to stay angry once we've allowed ourselves to get to that place. We indulge in thoughts that highlight the awfulness of the other person's behavior. We create elaborate, imaginary arguments in our head where we expose the other person's stupidity or selfishness or hypocrisy.

The point is, our real drivers in conflict are anything but obvious. The story we tell ourselves about our motivations is, at best, only part of the story. The gossiping, the stonewalling, the sarcasm—**it all feels good**. But we tell ourselves we *have* to do these things, we *have* to stay angry (because a great injustice has been committed) or worried (because the relationship is in upheaval), while failing to acknowledge the satisfaction our indignation or rumination is providing in the moment. So, where do we learn how to recognize and manage these hidden undercurrents? We'll get to that in just a minute.

Emotional Avoidance

Of course, indulgence isn't the only hidden psychological mechanism that drives our conflict behavior. There are dozens, but let's take the time to look at just one more: **emotional avoidance**. And we're not talking about surface-level avoidance, like caving in or withdrawing from a conflict to avoid unpleasant tension. Instead, we're talking about a human tendency to choose specific conflict reactions that enable us to avoid deeper, almost existential fears that threaten to emerge in the midst of a fight.

The most common, relatable example of this—one we've all probably been guilty of at one time or another—is choosing to get angry when the real emotion we're experiencing is hurt. For instance, a coworker gives us some critical feedback on our performance. We haven't been putting our share of work into this project, or our tone in the last few meetings has been abrasive, or our disorganization has become disruptive. Objectively speaking, the feedback's fair-minded and warranted. But we find ourselves racking our brain for reasons to cry foul. Maybe they're using a double standard. Maybe their delivery was arrogant. Maybe it's not their place to say anything. Something, anything to focus on anger, because the alternative is untenable.

And that alternative is **hurt**. A threat to our core sense of worth and belonging. The feedback threatens to rouse that existential insecurity that we've built so many defenses and distractions to push down. Or hope that we've outgrown. The fear that we are, in fact, not valuable or worthy.

The need to feel seen and valued is a primal one. From the moment we start to gain a sense of self, we humans seek validation. This life-long quest wears a thousand faces. Some of us try to be hyper-competent. Others try to make themselves more attractive. Or powerful. Or influential. Or caring. Yet it's really hard to fill this need. The world, sadly, doesn't run on making us feel good. There are countless signals—from the people close to us, from society, even from ourselves—that frustrate our ability to feel valued.

Facing these insecurities is perhaps our biggest challenge as adults. And it's hard, because we rarely have control over the terms of how we stand up to this gnawing need. So when that feedback comes in, and we get that punch-to-the-gut feeling, the monster stirs. Letting this monster climb to the surface and allowing ourselves to feel the debilitating hurt that comes with it is out of the question. So we scramble for an alternative, and too frequently, that alternative is some shade of anger. Anger isn't a breeze, but it's not crippling either. Often anger has the benefit of being empowering instead of crippling. You can do something with anger. It also externalizes the problem, so the fault no longer lies within us. And as we mentioned above, anger can actually feel good. So when we're faced with the choice between hurt and anger, we'll often choose anger. We'd be crazy not to.

Of course, we don't *always* choose anger. We frequently use emotional tools like despair, indifference, cynicism, disgust, or anxiety to avoid giving those deeper, buried fears the chance to crawl out of their cave. And perhaps the biggest problem with this habit is that we rarely recognize when we're doing it. The real emotions, assumptions, and goals driving our conflict responses are hidden well outside of our conscious awareness. This is perhaps the main reason why we do things like finger-point, or become hyper-critical, or cause drama, or cave in. It's why we do these things that are clearly counterproductive to our rational selves. And when we are not fully aware of our real motivations, we're less likely to be in the driver's seat of our responses.

A Solution Within Reach

What do we do with this information? Short of therapy, how can we help people handle conflict more productively? Well, there actually is a scalable, empirically validated way to do this. In all of these examples of runaway conflict, there's a single, highly responsive lever to which we always have access: **our thoughts**.

Specifically, it's what psychologists call *automatic thoughts*. These are cognitions that jump into our head during an event, often outside of our awareness. But even if they remain unconscious, they still have the power to trigger an emotional reaction, which has the power to trigger a behavioral reaction. The trick, then, is to recognize and manage these cognitions before they lead us astray. In a therapeutic setting, catching and reframing your automatic thoughts is known as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). It's a proven, scientifically validated way to help people get better at the messy under-the-hood stuff.

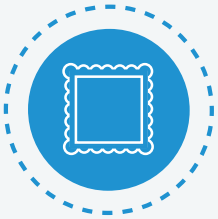
An Introduction to CBT

CBT works because the same brain mechanism that leads to emotions coming out sideways also works in reverse. Unhealthy automatic thoughts can lead to unproductive emotions. But conscious, positive, or neutral thoughts can also help us regulate our emotions. We interrupt the unconscious cascade of reactions before the situation gets away from us.

STEP 1: RECOGNIZE OUR UNHEALTHY, AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS

The initial step is recognizing our unhealthy automatic thoughts which, of course, is hard because they tend to be unconscious, at least at first. This is where emotions, and particularly strong emotions, become our friend. They serve as a beacon. Emotion is a signal to slow down and reflect. To ask ourselves, what's the thought driving this reaction? And with this automatic thought pulled to the forefront of our consciousness, we can assess it. We ask ourselves:

- Is this thought actually valid/true?
- Is there another way I could look at this situation?



STEP 2: CATCH AND REFRAME THAT AUTOMATIC THOUGHT

The next step is to reframe that thought. Reframing replaces the initial cognition with one that's more realistic and productive. For instance:

Automatic thought: They have no idea what they're talking about

Reframed thought: They're coming at this from a completely different angle than me

Automatic thought: If they push me, I'll push back even harder

Reframed thought: Maybe they don't realize how aggressively they're coming across

STEP 3: CHOOSE A MORE PRODUCTIVE RESPONSE

Once the thought has been reframed, our emotional reaction tends to realign itself with reality; to be proportional to the actual threat in the situation. We can go from lashing out to assertively stating our needs. We can go from retreating back to our desk to making sure the other person knows we're offended.

This process empowers us to put our rational, adult selves back in the driver's seat and choose a more productive response. And of course, like any skill, it takes time and practice. We've spent most of our lives letting our automatic thoughts pop in, do their damage, and then escape unnoticed. Perhaps the hardest part of this whole process is the simple (but not really simple) mindfulness that CBT teaches. But its effectiveness is proven—in fact, in the world of therapy, it's among the most proven treatments for a huge range of issues like anger management, depression, anxiety, smoking cessation, and addiction.

Getting Personal

Of course, therapy usually comes with a therapist; someone who can help us identify the specific automatic thoughts that are problematic for us. One person may struggle with thoughts like, "It's wrong to upset people," while someone else wrestles with thoughts like, "I'll look weak if I back down." Yet someone else might deal with, "If I admit I'm wrong, I'll lose all my credibility." It's invaluable to have someone who can guide us through the process and translate some of these abstract concepts into concrete, real-world behaviors.

At Wiley, we wanted to see if there was a way to take the elements that make CBT so effective and transplant them into a scalable training program. We spent two years developing and testing a course that takes the learner's personality into account and helps them understand the type of thoughts that may be particularly tempting. For example, a direct, assertive person may be prone to unrealistic thoughts like, "You're trying to control me," whereas a more mild-mannered, gentle person might be prone toward something like, "If I make you mad, it could ruin our relationship."

The engine behind this personalization is the **Everything DiSC® model** *(see side bar titled "DiSC® in Conflict")*, which helps participants quickly understand their own unique approach to conflict, with both its benefits and drawbacks.

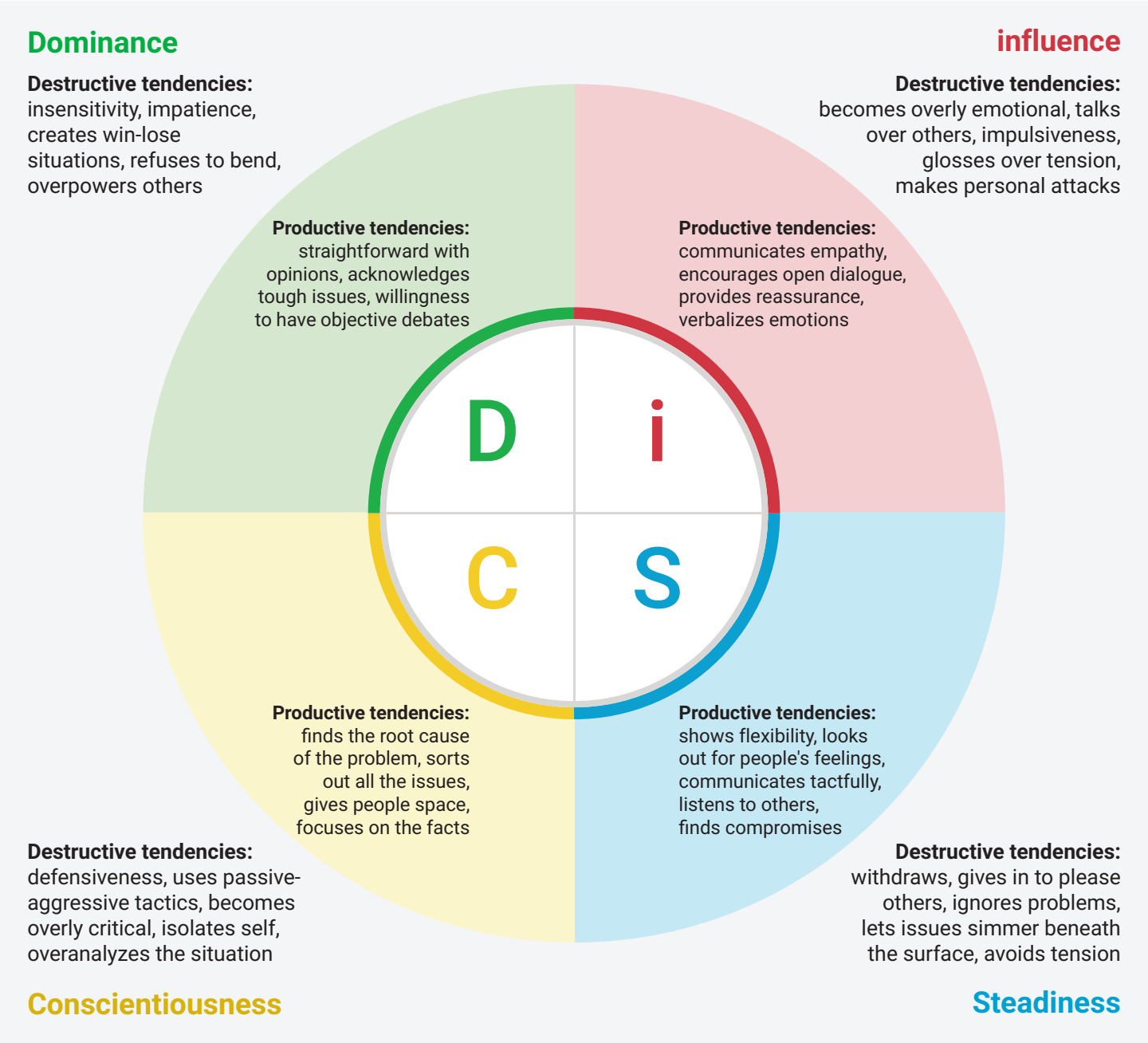
Further, trained facilitators know how to take personality models like this and use them to normalize the struggle we all have when trying to regulate our automatic thoughts. When someone participates in an Everything DiSC Productive Conflict training, they realize everyone deals with their own destructive responses to workplace conflict. The training gives them an opening in those moments to help take ownership of those problematic responses, and they are often grateful to finally have some insight into why this has been such a struggle throughout their lives.

Back in the Driver's Seat

We don't have to accept conflict as an inevitable drag on today's workplace. Becoming less reactive and judgmental isn't easy. At the same time, it's liberating to know that we don't have to be at the mercy of our automatic thoughts and hidden emotions. We have the power to put our conscious selves back in the driver's seat. There may be a lot going on under the hood—and let's be honest, we're never going to be fully aware of the psychological forces that push and pull us, particularly in the high-stakes arena of conflict. But as individuals, we have an access panel to help us be more deliberate about our choices during those times. And as organizations, we have a way to create a culture where conflict spurs innovation and superior problem solving rather than factions, politics, and toxicity.

DiSC® in Conflict

The DiSC® Model is a simple yet powerful model that describes four basic behavioral styles: D (Dominance), i (Influence), S (Steadiness), and C (Conscientiousness). Everyone is a blend of all four DiSC styles—usually one, two, or even three styles stand out—and each person has a unique behavioral profile with different styles and priorities. In conflict, different people have different priorities and tendencies. Learning about your own behavioral preferences, along with those of other styles in conflict, is like gaining access to your own personalized conflict compass, helping you navigate all sorts of conflict situations. The overview below shows the destructive and productive conflict tendencies that are typical for each style.



EVERYTHING DiSC® PRODUCTIVE CONFLICT HELPS ORGANIZATIONS HARNESS THE POWER OF CONFLICT.

This training program combines the personalized insights of DiSC® with the proven science of Cognitive Behavioral Theory to help each participant effectively respond to the uncomfortable and unavoidable challenges of workplace conflict. Rather than focus on a step-by-step process for conflict resolution, Productive Conflict offers personalized techniques to redirect destructive habits into more productive behaviors that improve workplace relationships and drive results.

To discover how Everything DiSC Productive Conflict can help transform conflict in your organization, connect with your Everything DiSC Authorized Partner today.

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