Clear Your Path To Resolving Conflicts

Remove Your Barriers and Get a Better Future

Louise Penberthy

Contents

If You've Ever Been in a Conflict at Work

Have you ever been in a conflict with someone you work with? Have you had a dispute with a manager or team leader, or worked with someone you had a disagreement with and ever since then they've been difficult to work with??

Probably your answer is yes. Or maybe it's, "Well, of course, *everybody* has problems getting along with someone at some point in their lives."

Over the years, I've noticed that people tend to get into patterns when they're trying to resolve disputes (or, if you're in agile, they're *anti-patterns*). Some of these patterns help you resolve disputes, but some of them make it harder.

One of the patterns (or anti-patterns) I see people get into is that they put barriers in their own way when they're trying to resolve conflicts and disputes. I call these *personal barriers to resolution.*

In this book, I tell you about three common personal barriers to resolution that I notice my mediation clients using. I describe each one, tell you the signs to look for in yourself to see if you're putting the barrier in your way, and how to remove the barrier and clear your path to resolving disputes and conflict.

A Metaphor: Barriers in a Roadway

Imagine that you're driving along a road. Maybe you're going someplace, or maybe you're just exploring. It's a gorgeous day, a perfect day to go for a drive, and you're having a good time.

Suddenly you come around a curve, and you see some barriers in the middle of the road. They say things like:

> Road Closed Ahead
> Bridge Washed Out
> Detour – Construction

You can see past the barriers, and you can see that the road keeps going. Maybe you can even see your destination. You want to keep going, but the barriers are in your way. They're making it

impossible for you to figure out if there's an alternate route, or whether the bridge really is washed out, or whether the construction is actually finished and the workers just forgot to remove the barriers.

Now imagine that you put those barriers in the road yourself. Unconsciously, you're keeping yourself from getting where you want to go. You're keeping yourself from even exploring possibilities for how you can get where you want to go.

People Put Barriers in Their Own Way of Resolving Disputes

In my mediation practice, I see clients put barriers in their own way of resolving disputes all the time. They aren't aware that they're doing it, and they're certainly not doing it deliberately. But unconsciously, they're making it hard for themselves to resolve disputes. That means that the dispute you have with a manager or supervisor, for example, it might seem to be resolved, but you aren't happy with how it worked out. Or you don't like working with a particular coworker because there's still this awkwardness between you.

Since people aren't aware they're putting barriers in their way, they think the other person is doing it.

Then, when they can't resolve the dispute, they blame the other person. The dispute doesn't get resolved, and whatever problems the dispute is causing for them, they keep right on being a problem.

If You Don't Remove Your Personal Barriers to Resolution…

If you don't remove your personal barriers to resolution, you're going to have a hard time resolving the dispute you're in. Maybe you won't even be able to resolve it at all. Here are some of the things that can happen if you don't remove your barriers.

… you'll sabotage the resolution process

If you don't remove your personal barriers to resolution, you'll sabotage the resolution process. Whether you're using a formal resolution process like mediation, or an informal process like just

talking directly with the other person, if you don't remove these barriers, you'll think that there's no way to resolve the dispute. So you won't listen to the other person's suggestions for resolving the dispute. You won't have any suggestions yourself, or if you do, they'll end up being halfhearted and the other person won't like them or accept them.

… you won't act in your own best interests

If you don't remove your personal barriers, you won't act in your own best interests. Since your best interests are probably to quickly fix the problem, resolve the dispute, and get on with your work and/or life, if you don't resolve the dispute, you won't get what you need. Unresolved conflict with a coworker can make work awkward and uncomfortable. Unresolved conflict with a manager or supervisor can make work awful, maybe even make it so you don't get a raise or promotion.

… you won't get a good plan for the future

If you don't remove personal barriers, you won't get a good plan for the future. As the saying goes, there's no use wishing for a better past. So until someone invents a time machine (without any paradoxes), the only thing you can do is create a good plan for the future. That's what a mediated agreement is: a good plan for what will happen in the future to resolve the dispute, make people whole (if there were some damages of some kind), and mend relationships.

… you may end important relationships

If you don't remove personal barriers, and you don't resolve the dispute, you may end important relationships. I've worked with people who've been friends, colleagues, or both, for years. But if the dispute isn't resolved, one or both of them won't want to continue the relationship.

If it's a business relationship, you might lose business, lose a good client, or lose an important a source of contacts and referrals. If it's an

interpersonal relationship at work, you might lose a colleague you value, or lose an important mentor, or have to transfer away from a team you like working with.

Personal Barrier #1: Letting Past Conflicts Get in the Way

One common barrier to resolution I see as a mediator, is when people let past conflicts get in the way of resolving current conflicts. Here's an example.

Case study: the founder/director and a former board member

I mediated a case between the founder/director of a nonprofit – I'll call him Albert – and a former board member – I'll call him Harrison. The case seemed simple: Albert and Harrison had each acted as guarantor for a relative in a business arrangement between those two relatives. When that business

arrangement fell through, Albert blamed Harrison's relative, Harrison blamed Albert, Harrison said Albert needed to reimburse him for all the money he'd lost, Albert said it was Harrison's own fault and refused to pay him anything.

The amount of money involved was relatively small, but they couldn't come to an agreement. Both of them said they wanted to mediate. But both of them were sabotaging the process. Each of them was accusing the other person of ruining the business arrangement, and neither of them was making any offers that the other person would accept.

I could tell that each of them was doing his best to hide that he was really angry with the other one, like the conflict was bigger than it appeared to be. Using some skilled probing in private conversations with each of them, I found out that there was a big conflict behind the current one. Albert, the former board member, had wanted to create a managing director position and have Harrison, the founder/director, give up financial duties. Harrison

did *not* want to do that, there was a nasty lawsuit, and Albert resigned.

That was why Albert and Harrison couldn't resolve the case I was helping them with. That past conflict was a huge barrier in their way of resolving the conflict they were in now.

What you'll notice in yourself

As a mediator, I've noticed three things in people when they're letting a past conflict get in the way of resolving a current one. Since, most of the time, people aren't aware they're putting barriers in their way, I'm a big believer in identifying concrete, specific things you can actually notice. So here are three things to look for that might mean you're letting a past conflict be a barrier.

Feelings and Thoughts

Feeling angry, tense, and/or intimidated; constantly thinking about the past conflict.

Wanting to Right The Wrongs of the Past

Wanting the resolution to this conflict to resolve the previous conflict in the way you think it should have been resolved.

Seeing the Other Person As Completely in the Wrong

Blaming the other person completely for the current conflict. Most of the time, a conflict isn't just one person's fault. It comes from two people doing the best they can with the information and beliefs they have.

How to remove this barrier

Acknowledge how the past conflict makes the present conflict difficult

One way to remove the barrier of a past conflict is to acknowledge to yourself, even if you don't say anything to the other person, that the previous

conflict you had with that person is making it hard for you to resolve the current one. Just tell yourself something like, "Yes, this is hard, after what they did the last time. I'm still angry about it, and I'm having a hard time not letting my anger about the past keep me from dealing with the present."

More about the founder/director and the former board member

When I brought Albert and Harrison back into joint mediation session, I started by acknowledging how difficult it was for them to even be in the same room together. I commended them for being there and working to resolve the current dispute.

As soon as I said that, they both relaxed. Just acknowledging it was enough to help them set aside the barrier that that past conflict was making for them, and they finally started making progress in the mediation.

See the dispute as less personal.

Another way to remove the barrier of a past conflict is to find a way to see the dispute as less personal. For example, think about what you'd do if it wasn't you in the dispute, but it was your brother or sister. Or imagine that your best friend was in the dispute, and asked you what you should do. Whatever you'd recommend to someone you care about, is probably a good solution for you.

Imagining that someone else is in the dispute helps you because you can separate out some of your anger and frustration (and anything else you're feeling), and get a different perspective on the dispute.

Story: The Website Designer and Me

I've helped myself by seeing disputes as less personal. Recently, I was having problems with a website designer I'd hired. Then I asked myself, "If it was my colleague Orelia who was in this dispute with my website designer, and she asked me for advice, what would I say?" When I put it like that,

the answer was easy: "Stop working with that website designer!" So that's what I did.

Create a good plan for the future.

A third way to keep a past conflict from making a current one hard to resolve, is to create a good plan for the future that will resolve the current dispute. Sometimes, people worry more about the current dispute because of an unresolved past dispute, so they project that worry onto the future. Creating a good plan for the future removes that worry.

Wrap-up: the founder/director and the former board member

With Albert and Harrison, their good plan for the future was to agree that neither of them owed each other anything, drop their court cases, and go their separate ways. It wasn't any one person's fault why the relationship between their relatives had fallen through. Sometimes, things just don't work out.

By the end of the mediation, Albert and Harrison were having a good conversation. They were catching up on what they'd been doing, what was happening with their families, and actually smiling at each other.

Personal Barrier #2: Trying to Control the Other Person

Another common barrier to resolution I see as a mediator, is when people try to control the other person. Here's an example.

Case study: manager and programmer

I mediated a case between a manager and a programmer on her team. The manager – I'll call her Rose – was frustrated with her team member – I'll call him Sergey.

Rose said Sergey didn't communicate well, he didn't want to talk about the problems she saw in his work, and when she asked him a question he'd

stare off into the distance for a long time before he'd answer.

Sergey wished Rose would just leave him alone and let him get his work done. If she actually had any programming experience, she wouldn't tell him how to do his job. He told me in private that he really wanted to be transferred to another team. He kept saying, "I need to make sure that she treats the next guy better."

Rose said she was treating Sergey just fine, he was the one who wasn't being professional. She wasn't willing to "change herself," which is how she saw what he was asking.

In fact, Sergey was trying to control Rose's behavior. If he'd just wanted her to behave differently towards him, that would have been reasonable. But he kept demanding her to guarantee that she'd behave differently towards every programmer on her team going forward. She wouldn't agree, so their mediation was going nowhere.

What you'll notice in yourself

As a mediator, I've noticed two things in people when they're trying to control the other person. Here are two things you'll notice in yourself that might mean you're trying to control the other person.

Wanting to punish the other person for past behavior, or determine the other person's future behavior

Thinking that the other person "shouldn't get away with this," or that you "need to make sure he (or she) never does this to anyone again," or something similar.

Wanting the other person to do more than is really necessary

Insisting the other person to do things that go beyond what you really need to fix the problem or

make yourself whole.

How to remove this barrier

There are three things you can do to remove this barrier in yourself: control what you can control, release responsibility for that person, and give the other person more autonomy, mastery, and purpose.

Control what you can control

Rather than trying to control the other person, control what you actually can control. Another way to think of this is, claim the power you really have. If you want to control someone else, you're probably (unconsciously) trying to compensate for some part of your life where you feel you don't have control.

More about the manager and programmer

In a private conversation with Sergey, I asked him if

it was really his responsibility to control Rose's behavior. And I asked him if there was some control he could exercise in his own life. He wanted to be transferred to another team; was there something he could do to make that happen? Yes, he had friends in the company who could help him get connected with other managers. In fact, he'd already talked to two of them. Once Sergey realized that he'd already taken some control in his own life, he stopped demanding to control Rose's future behavior, and she was more open to hearing his suggestions for resolving the conflict between them.

Release responsibility for that person

Let go of any feeling of responsibility for that person. If you're not that person's employer, manager, parent, or guardian, you're not responsible for that person. It's not your job to make them behave in a particular way.

If you are responsible for that person — for example, if you *are* their employer, manager,

parent, or guardian — then you may have the right to determine their behavior going forward. Just make sure you're only try to determine behavior that you really have the right to control.

Give the other person more autonomy, mastery, and purpose

Sometimes, if you're trying to control the other person, you might have better luck if you do exactly the opposite. Rather than taking away their autonomy by controlling them more, give them more autonomy. Or arrange for them go to training, so they have more mastery in their work. Or change their responsibilities so their work has more purpose.

Story: giving the programmer more purpose

I learned this lesson about wanting to control people early in my career. When I was a project manager at a small startup in Atlanta, this one programmer was really frustrating to work with. Because he was

a contractor, the way employment laws were in Georgia, I couldn't tell him when he had to be at work or even that he had to come to team meetings. He'd say he'd be coming into work at a certain time, but then he wouldn't. He'd do nothing right up until a deadline, scaring me to death, then work for 48 hours straight. Programmers were in demand in Atlanta, so I couldn't just end his contract and find someone else.

Then my boss told me to give this programmer more purpose. He pointed out that this guy was good at his job, so I should make him the lead programmer on the project. So that's what I did. After that, the programmer was a lot easier to work with, he came to meetings, and he made the whole team better because he contributed his expertise to everyone.

Wrap-up: the manager and the programmer

When I talked privately with Rose, I asked her if she could give Sergey more autonomy or purpose or

both (he already had excellent mastery of his job). Rose thought about it, and then she said what she really needed was for him to be more clear about what he did and why it took as long as it did. So I suggested that she shadow him for a day and learn what he did by watching him. And while they were at it, why didn't he shadow her?

When I got Rose and Sergey back in the room together, Rose acknowledged to Sergey that she didn't understand the work he did. She asked him if she could shadow him for a day. She also offered to give Sergey more choice in how he spent his time.

At first, Sergey really didn't want to have Rose shadow him, but when she promised she wouldn't interfere, he said yes. He also said that he wanted more choice in how he spent his time. For his part, he agreed that he should keep Rose better informed about what he was doing and the progress he was making. Once they'd agreed to these things, he didn't say anything more about wanting

to make sure she "treated the next guy better."

Personal Barrier #3: Being Stuck in Your Own Perspective

A third common barrier to resolution I see as a mediator, is being stuck in your own perspective and unable to accept new information. Here's an example.

Case study: an accountant and an app-development company

I mediated a case between an accountant – I'll call him Rodrick – and a small app-development company that had been a client of his. The IRS had reviewed the company's tax filings for a previous year, and they'd found some mistakes in Rodrick's work. So they were assessing additional taxes and

imposing a penalty.

Melissa, the CEO of the app-development company, was angry – which was natural – especially because the reason she stopped working with the accountant was because he'd kept making mistakes. Melissa wanted Rodrick to pay the penalty, and reimburse her company for what they paid their new accountant to correct the mistake and re-file with the IRS.

Rodrick said that the problem was their fault; they never sent him two key documents he needed, and they'd had a chance to review his work before they signed off on it. In any case, if they thought there were problems with his work, they should have given him a chance to fix the problems before hiring someone else.

Melissa insisted that Rodrick never asked for those two key documents. So he logged onto his email right then and there and showed them the email in his Sent folder. But Melissa said that was irrelevant, because of all the mistakes he made before. She

weren't willing to settle for anything less than what she'd asked for initially. The mediation was stuck, because both Rodrick and Melissa were stuck in their perspective.

What you'll notice in yourself

There are three things you'll notice in yourself if you're being stuck in your own perspective. Usually people aren't aware that they're putting this barrier in their way because people tend to believe their first perspective on something.

Not changing your interpretation of the past

No matter what new information you hear, continuing to make meaning of the past in the same way.

Dismissing the other person's point of view

Thinking, or saying, that the other person's point of

view doesn't matter.

Seeing the other personal as delusional, a liar, or covering for their mistakes

Finding a way to discredit the other person's sanity, truthfulness, or honesty.

How to remove this barrier

There are two things you can do to remove this personal barrier in yourself: imagine that you'd known the new information all along, and imagine that your best friend is giving you the information.

Imagine that you'd known the new information all along

Imagine that the information that's new to you now, you'd been given at the time. What would you think of the dispute? What would you think would be a good outcome? The longer people believe something to be true, the more investment they

have in its actually being true, and this takes time to undo.

Imagine that your best friend is giving you the information

Imagine that you're getting this new information from your best friend rather than the person you're in conflict with. Would you believe your best friend? Probably you would. We tend to believe people we like and feel similar to, rather than people we don't like or are in conflict with.

Story: an audience member at a talk I gave

I give talks on the subject of removing personal barriers to resolution. The most recent time I gave this talk, one of the audience members came up to me afterwards and said she did this right there during the my talk. She thought about something a team member had told her that she didn't believe. Her team member was offended. But during my talk, she realized that if a friend had told her that

same thing, she would've believed it. So she was going to apologize to her coworker.

Wrap-up: the accountant and the app-development company

I asked Melissa to consider how she'd feel about Rodrick if she'd known earlier that he'd sent them an email. At first she kept insisting he should have checked with them (which was probably true), but finally she was willing to accept this new information. She acknowledged that their contract with him said that they should give him a chance to fix any problems, so she dropped her request that he reimburse them for what they paid the new accountant. Rodrick agreed to do the paperwork to request a waiver of the penalty, and since the company wouldn't have to pay any extra taxes after all, because their new accountant had refiled, Melissa agreed.

Clear Your Path to a Better Future

Next time you're in a conflict or dispute with someone – and I'm not saying I hope it happens, but just in case – make sure you're not putting barriers in your own way of resolving the problem.

First, look for the signs that you might be letting the past be a barrier to the present: feeling angry, tense, and/or intimidated; constantly thinking about the past conflict; wanting to right the wrongs of the past; seeing the other person as completely in the wrong.

Set aside this barrier by acknowledging to yourself how the past conflict makes the present conflict difficult; seeing the dispute as less personal; and creating a good plan for the future.

Second, look for the signs that you're trying to control the other person: if you're thinking, or even saying, something like, "They shouldn't get away with this," or, "I need to make sure he/she never does this to anyone again."

Set aside this barrier to resolution by controlling what you can control, releasing responsibility for that person, and giving the other person more autonomy, mastery, and purpose.

Third, look for the signs that you might be stuck in your perspective: not changing your interpretation of the past, dismissing the other person's point of view, and seeing the other person as delusional, a liar, or covering for their mistakes.

Set aside this barrier by imagining that you knew the new information all along, and that your best friend is giving you the information.

Remove all of your personal barriers to resolution. For your business, make sure you preserve business relationships, keep good clients, and stay

in touch with referral partners. And for yourself, mend relationships with colleagues you value, strengthen your relationship with your mentor, and enjoy working with your team again.

About the Author

Louise Penberthy is a mediator and Scrum Master based in Seattle, Washington, specializing in work with tech, software, and engineering companies, working both on site and on line. She also writes about diversity, inclusion, and enjoying cross-cultural experiences. She can be reached at (206) 930-1113 or via www.humaninterop.com.

Let Me Help You Remove Your Personal Barriers to Resolution

Are you in a conflict or dispute that you just can't resolve, because you or the other person is putting barriers in your way?

Call me today, and get a free 30-minute consultation on how to clear your path to resolve conflicts.

Louise Penberthy

humaninterop@gmail.com

(206) 930-1113

www.humaninterop.com