From conflict to connection: Why strong relationships matter in leadership

Many leaders instinctively fall into one of two traps when it comes to conflict. One approach is to avoid conflict. I've seen it countless times—not just in my own leadership journey but in the stories of many others. We avoid conflict at work for a variety of reasons: fear of rocking the boat or looking too aggressive, concern about what people might think about you, or simply not knowing how to navigate uncomfortable conversations.

But what if avoiding conflict is actually holding us back? What if, in our efforts to maintain harmony, we're causing more harm by letting issues fester? And what if the key to resolving conflict is not in avoiding or overcorrecting but in building strong, trust-based relationships?

The cost of avoiding conflict at work

Like many leaders, I used to think that a team without conflict was a harmonious and healthy team. Therefore, avoiding conflict was part of creating a healthy team culture.

If there wasn't tension, then we could focus on the actual work, right? But slowly, I realized the opposite was true. By sidestepping the tough conversations, I allowed resentment to grow, communication to break down, and, ultimately, the team's effectiveness to deteriorate.

Avoiding conflict in the workplace isn't about keeping the peace. It's about allowing small cracks to grow into chasms that eventually undermine everything you've built. This happens because of the unresolved issue and what that avoidance signals to the team—that problems, frustrations, or differences don't matter enough to address. And when others don't matter as much as we do—or the mission—you will start to have "people problems, " which are the hardest to fix and the most disruptive to the organization.

Some leaders take the opposite approach. Instead of avoiding conflict, they tend to overcorrect. Rather than listening or building relationships, they quickly step in to teach or correct their employees or even other leaders. This can be just as damaging. Imagine being constantly corrected or directed without a strong relationship with your leader. It's demoralizing, and it rarely inspires positive change.

Both extremes—avoiding conflict and overcorrecting—are symptoms of a deeper issue. They stem from a failure to do the hardest, most difficult part of leadership: building strong, healthy relationships with your team, peers, and colleagues around you.
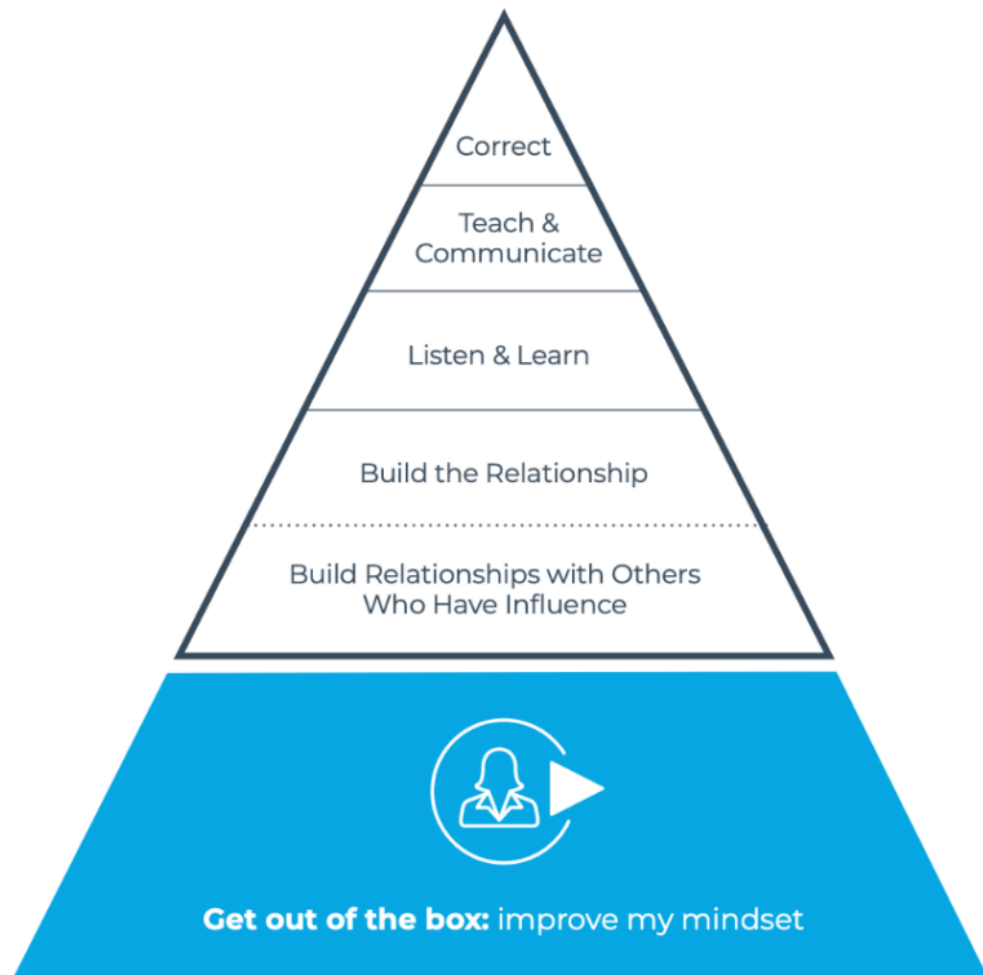
The Influence Pyramid: A blueprint for conflict resolution at work

This is where the Arbinger Institute's **[Influence Pyramid](#)** comes into play. The pyramid suggests that before we can effectively **correct** or **teach and communicate**, we must first spend time **listening and learning**, **building relationships**, and

ultimately, [working on our own **mindset**](#).

At the base of the pyramid is the idea of "getting out of the box"—improving our mindset. A leader's effectiveness, especially when it comes to conflict at work, starts with their mindset. Are we seeing our team as people with their own perspectives, struggles, and needs? Or are we seeing them as problems to be solved or conflicts to be avoided? Either way—we aren't seeing them as people who matter as much as we do, and thus, they feel discarded.

The Influence Pyramid

Correct

Teach & Communicate

Listen & Learn

Build the Relationship

Build Relationships with Others Who Have Influence

Get out of the box: improve my mindset

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When leaders are stuck in a conflict, the solution often isn't

found by correcting or teaching. As the pyramid suggests, the best approach is to go lower in the pyramid. That means focusing on building trust, improving relationships, and creating a foundation where difficult conversations can happen naturally and productively.

Why relationships matter most

I've learned that the best leaders don't avoid conflict, nor do they leap to correction as their first instinct. Instead, they take the time to **build relationships**—and this is the hard part. Building relationships is messy, it's personal, and it requires vulnerability from both the leader and the team. But it's also the most effective way to create a team culture where conflict can be addressed in a healthy and productive manner.

Leaders who focus on relationships can have tough conversations because they've built the trust needed for those conversations to take place. Employees aren't afraid of being corrected because they know their leader is coming from a place of care and support, not judgment.

Moving forward with courage

Avoiding conflict at work may seem like the easy route in the short term, and overcorrecting may feel like being proactive, but neither approach leads to long-term success. The most effective leaders are those who are willing to do the uncomfortable work of building relationships. They understand that their influence depends not on their position or power but on the strength of their connections with the people they lead.

3 tips for approaching conflict with curiosity

✓ **Examine your relationships**
Are you building the kind of relationships that can withstand tough conversations?

✓ **Seek to understand**
Instead of jumping to conclusions, take the time to understand the perspectives of those involved

✓ **View conflict as an opportunity**
Approach the situation with a curious mindset and a willingness to explore new possibilities

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By focusing on building trust, listening more, and improving our own mindset first, we create an environment where conflict is no longer something to fear. It becomes an opportunity to grow, innovate, and strengthen the team.

So, the next time you're faced with conflict, resist the urge to avoid it or rush to correct it. Instead, take a step back and get curious. Do you have a strong foundation? Are you building the kind of relationships that can withstand tough conversations? And if not, how can you start?

Because, in the end, the true test of leadership isn't whether

you can avoid conflict in the workplace—it's whether you can build the relationships that allow your team to thrive through it.
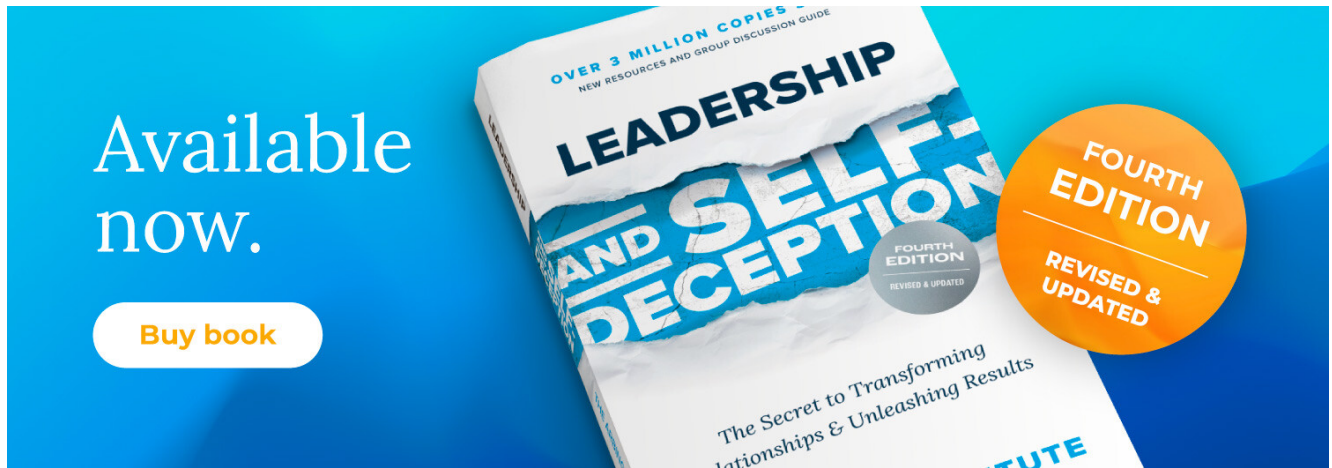
This blog is published as part of Arbinger's Leadership Faux Pas series. Have you ever wondered what not to do as a leader? This series dives deep into the common missteps that can derail even the most promising leaders. Learn from these pitfalls and elevate your leadership game. New blogs released weekly!

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