

THE AIKIDO OF LEADERSHIP: POWER, CONFLICT, AND THE PRACTICE OF TRUST BY BEATA C. LEWIS, JD, MSC, PCC

Conflict is not a sign that something has gone wrong. It is a sign that something important is trying to move.

Consider that possibility, especially if those statements are jarring for you. In leadership and organizational life, conflict is often treated as a problem to manage, suppress, or outsource. We convene meetings to “resolve” it, draft agreements to contain it, or quietly work around it to avoid disruption. In doing so, we miss its deeper intelligence – and we weaken our collective capacity to lead better.

What if conflict were understood not as a breakdown of collaboration, but as a *threshold moment* – a point where a system is being asked to grow?

This way of seeing conflict has been deeply shaped by an embodied leadership lineage that includes the work of **Richard Strozzi Heckler**, **Wendy Palmer**, and **Thomas Crum**. From Strozzi Heckler – and his work at the Strozzi Institute, particularly *The Leadership Dojo* – I draw a deep respect for leadership as an embodied practice of integrity, presence, and reliability under pressure, where character is trained rather than assumed. Wendy Palmer’s teachings, especially *The Practice of Freedom* and *The Intuitive Body*, have shaped how I understand inner freedom, choice, and upright, non-collapsing presence in moments of challenge. And Thomas Crum’s work, particularly *The Magic of Conflict*, reframed conflict for me as a vital, creative force – energy that, when met with skill and presence, can become a catalyst for learning, alignment, and trust rather than division.

Seen through this lens, conflict is not something to eliminate or control. It is a form of movement – information arriving in the system – asking leaders and teams to increase their capacity for presence, collaboration, and coherent action.

This is where the Aikido of Leadership begins.

CONFLICT AS ENERGY, NOT ERROR

In Aikido, force is never met head-on. To collide with it would only escalate harm. Instead, the practitioner blends with the incoming energy, stays centered, and redirects it toward balance and resolution. The attacker is not an enemy or adversary; they are a source of information.

Leadership in complex systems works the same way.

Conflict brings energy – emotion, urgency, resistance, fear, conviction. That energy is neutral. What determines the outcome is not the presence of conflict, but *the quality of presence that meets it*.



COACHING FOR LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATIVE EXCELLENCE

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When leaders attempt to overpower conflict – through authority, logic, or positional control – they may win the moment, but they may also fracture trust. When they avoid it, the energy goes underground, reappearing later as disengagement, passive resistance, or erosion of accountability. But when leaders meet conflict with grounded presence, curiosity, and alignment to purpose, something else becomes possible: *learning, coherence, and forward movement*.

POWER THAT STABILIZES RATHER THAN DOMINATES

Much of what passes for leadership still relies on *power-over* dynamics – subtle or overt. Who decides. Who controls the narrative. Who gets heard. These dynamics may deliver short-term compliance, but they are costly. They exhaust people. They distort truth. And they make collaboration brittle.

Power, when embodied skillfully, does something very different. It stabilizes the system.

This is *power-with*: authority that comes not from force, but from coherence. From a leader's capacity to remain upright – physically, emotionally, and ethically – when pressure is applied. Teams can feel the difference immediately. They relax. They tell the truth more easily. They take responsibility rather than defending territory or themselves.

This kind of authority is not performative. It cannot be faked. It is somatic. It lives in posture, breath, timing, and restraint. And it is trained, not declared.

TRUST IS NOT A SENTIMENT—IT IS A SYSTEM CONDITION

In your work, trust consistently appears not as a feeling, but as a *capacity* – something that can be strengthened or degraded by how leaders show up, especially under stress.

Trust grows when people experience *consistency* between words and actions. When leaders stay present rather than disappearing when things get uncomfortable. When boundaries and agreements are held clearly without aggression or collapse. When disagreement does not threaten belonging, safety, or dignity.

This is why conflict is such a profound test of trust. Less because it is dangerous, but much more because it reveals character.

Under pressure, do we tighten and control? Do we appease and disappear? Or do we remain connected – to ourselves, to others, and to the shared purpose that brought us together in the first place?

Trust is built when leaders stay “on the mat.”

STAYING ON THE MAT

“Staying on the mat” is a phrase borrowed from Aikido, and it translates cleanly into leadership. It means not leaving the conversation when emotions rise. Not withdrawing, attacking, or outsourcing responsibility for what is happening in the room. It means staying engaged without becoming reactive. And recovering skillfully and quickly when, in our humanity, we do become reactive.

Most leadership failures in conflict are not failures of skill. They are failures of presence.

Leaders leave the mat when they become more invested in being right than in being aligned. When they rush to fix instead of listen. When they harden to protect their authority – or soften to preserve harmony at the cost of truth.

Staying on the mat requires inner freedom: the *ability to choose one’s response* rather than be driven by habit or threat. This freedom is not abstract. It is embodied. It shows up in the capacity to pause, to breathe, to feel one’s feet on the ground before speaking or acting.

COLLABORATION IS A SOMATIC PRACTICE

Collaboration is often framed as a cognitive or structural challenge: clarify roles, improve communication, align incentives. These matter – but they are insufficient.

Collaboration breaks down not because people lack goodwill, but because nervous systems become dysregulated under pressure. When this happens, even well-designed structures fail.

Embodied leaders attend to this first. They understand that posture, tone, pacing, and attention shape the field of interaction before a single word is spoken. An upright, relaxed body communicates safety and steadiness. A collapsed or armored body communicates threat or disengagement.

Teams attune to this instantly. And they respond accordingly.

This is why leadership development that focuses only on insight or mindset rarely produces durable change. Under real conditions – time pressure, stakes, visibility – the body defaults to what it has practiced. Leadership, then, becomes a question of training, not intention.

CONFLICT AS A DEVELOPMENTAL INVITATION

Every conflict reveals something the system does not yet know how to hold. A conversation it has not yet learned how to have. A difference it does not yet know how to integrate. A boundary it has not yet learned how to honor. Seen this way, *conflict is not an interruption of the work – it is the work*.

Leaders who understand this stop trying to eliminate tension. Instead, they ask better questions:

- What is this tension asking of us?
- What capacity is trying to emerge here?
- What would it take for us to meet this moment without betraying ourselves or each other?

When leaders frame conflict developmentally, shame recedes. Blame loses its grip. Responsibility becomes collective rather than personal.

THE SMALLEST MOVE THAT RESTORES ALIGNMENT

In Aikido, the most effective techniques use minimal force and precise timing. Leadership is no different. Often the most powerful intervention is not a speech or a decision, but a pause. A question. Naming what is already present but unspoken.

The art lies in knowing when to act – and when to get out of the way.

This is not passive leadership. Mastery in this quality of leadership comes from recurrent, deliberate practice. It is disciplined restraint, grounded in trust that the system, when met with clarity and presence, can reorganize itself toward coherence.

LEADERSHIP AS A WAY OF BEING

The Aikido of Leadership is not a technique to apply in difficult moments. It is a *way of being cultivated over time*. A practice of aligning body, values, and action so that when conflict arises – as it inevitably will – the leader becomes a stabilizing force rather than an accelerant.

This kind of leadership does not seek to dominate complexity or smooth it over. It meets complexity with humility, courage, and embodied wisdom. It understands that collaboration, trust, and shared power are not ideals to aspire to, but capacities to be trained – again and again – under real conditions.

In times like these, we do not need leaders who can control outcomes. We need leaders who can *stay present in the middle of movement* and help systems find their way forward to co-create what matters most without also breaking what matters most.

That is the quiet power of the Aikido of Leadership.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Beata C. Lewis, JD, MSC, PCC is an executive coach and systems practitioner with over 25 years of experience partnering with senior leaders and leadership teams navigating complexity, conflict, and

meaningful change. Her work integrates systemic team coaching with somatic and embodied leadership practices, alongside complexity-aware approaches to collaboration, trust, and decision-making. Certified as a Master Somatic Coach™ since 2003 and influenced by a rich embodied leadership lineage, Beata supports leaders in cultivating presence, integrity, and reliable action under pressure—especially when no single right answer exists. She is known for her grounded presence, discerning insight, and her ability to help individuals and teams engage tension as a source of learning, coherence, and forward movement.