

## **WORKING WITH TENSION, WORKING FOR THE WHOLE** A SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO CONFLICT, CAPACITY, AND COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

**BY BEATA C. LEWIS, JD, MSC, PCC**

This piece integrates years of work coaching individuals and teams to expand their capacity to grow through difficulty and to strengthen collaborative excellence. It reflects my ongoing inquiry into how leaders can engage tension in ways that strengthen — rather than strain — the systems they steward.

Conflict is often treated as a disruption of leadership. In reality, it is one of its proving grounds. Wherever intelligent and committed people work together, tension will arise — between priorities, risk tolerances, stakeholder commitments, and interpretations of responsibility. The central question is not whether disagreement will occur, but whether a leadership body has the capacity to engage it in ways that strengthen rather than fragment the system it serves.

Many approaches to conflict emphasize resolution. A *systemic approach emphasizes capacity*: the capacity to regulate reactivity, to surface interests beneath positions, to hold relationship and results as co-equal commitments, and to widen the frame from a dyadic dispute to the broader stakeholder ecosystem shaped by how tension is handled.

It is at this intersection that facilitative mediation and systemic team coaching converge.

Facilitative mediation centers empowerment and recognition. Sustainable outcomes emerge when parties retain agency and recognize one another's legitimacy. Systemic team coaching extends this orientation over time, working not only to address episodes of conflict but to increase a team's ongoing capacity to navigate complexity and create value in service of stakeholders.

Viewed together, these disciplines offer a coherent framework for engaging conflict generatively rather than reactively.

### **SIX SHARED PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE**

Systemic team coaching and mediation share at least six foundational principles. In practice, they may be expressed in different ways, appropriate to the needs of the people involved and the ultimate outcome.

#### **1. Agency as a Foundation for Durable Agreement**

Co-creation and co-ownership strengthen commitment and follow-through. In facilitative mediation, the parties — not the mediator — determine the outcome. Systemic team coaching similarly centers individual and collective agency. The team itself must own both its results and its relational patterns. The coach is not the fixer.



Shared principle: Durable agreements are chosen, not imposed.

Practice implications:

- Resist solving.
- Make process visible.
- Invite the system to reflect on itself.
- Ask, “What do you want to commit to?”

When people design their own next step, commitment deepens.

## 2. Interests Beneath Positions

Interest-based negotiation distinguishes between rigid positions and the more flexible interests that underlie them. What appears to be a strategic impasse is often rooted in divergent risk tolerances, accountability pressures, identity concerns, or stakeholder loyalties. Surfacing interests shifts conflict from adversarial argument to collaborative design.

Shared principle: Move from position or argument to understanding.

Practice implications:

- Ask, “What does this protect for you?”
- Distinguish preference from non-negotiable need.
- Surface underlying fears without pathologizing them.
- Make interests visible to the whole group.

When interests and underlying needs are named, creativity becomes possible.

## 3. Relationship as Structural, Not Peripheral

In mediation, the relational field shapes whether agreements endure. Addressing relational dynamics as co-equal to substance issues can make the difference between durable resolution and retaliatory cycles that reopen grievance. In systemic team coaching, negotiating connections is foundational. A team may technically agree and still undermine implementation if relational fractures remain unaddressed.

Relationship is not ancillary to substance; it is structurally determinative of it.

Shared principle: The relationship is not a side issue; it is central to the work.

Practice implications:

- Normalize structured listening before solution-building.
- Debrief how conversations unfold, not just what was decided.
- Address rupture explicitly rather than hoping it fades.
- Separate content disagreement from relational injury.

When recognition is restored, conflict becomes less threatening.

#### 4. Expanding from Dyad to Ecosystem

Conflict rarely belongs solely to the individuals engaged in it. Decisions ripple outward to business partners, employees, clients, families, communities, and future stakeholders. Impact ripples throughout a system. Widening the lens reduces personalization and reorients the conversation toward purposeful stewardship.

In both mediation and systemic team coaching, practitioners surface broader stakeholder impact. Opening the conversation to include these perspectives reminds participants of differing needs, time horizons, and long-term consequences.

Shared principle: Conflict belongs to a wider system.

Practice implications:

- Use stakeholder mapping.
- Ask, “Who else is affected by how you handle this?”
- Introduce future perspective: “What culture are you building?”
- Evaluate options not just for fairness, but for systemic consequence.

#### 5. Reframing and De-Personalization

Reframing translates character judgments into system dynamics. For example, “He is controlling” becomes “Predictability is important here,” and “Marketing is unrealistic” becomes “Risk tolerance differs here.” Such reframing preserves dignity while redirecting attention toward patterns, incentives, and structural misalignment.

In both mediation and systemic team coaching, reframing is a discipline of empathy and forward movement. The shift from shame and blame to systemic inquiry is central to a generative approach.

Shared principle: Translate character attacks into system dynamics.

Practice implications:

- Shift from blame to pattern.
- Name recurring loops.
- Distinguish personality from structure.
- Diagnose incentives and role ambiguity before diagnosing character.

This preserves dignity while addressing real friction.

## 6. From Resolution to Capacity

Taking a generative stance, conflict is not merely something to subdue or settle; it is something to metabolize. This orientation strengthens learning and long-term growth.

Mediation typically seeks resolution of a discrete dispute, even when participation improves how people work together. Systemic team coaching seeks increased capacity to anticipate and respond creatively to tension in the future.

Practice Implications:

- Treat disagreement as information.
- Expect differentiation inside healthy systems.
- Ask, “What is this tension teaching us?”
- Design agreements as experiments, not final verdicts.

A workable agreement that increases trust is stronger than a seemingly perfect agreement that erodes trust.

## WORKING MORE PROACTIVELY WITH CONFLICT

Working more proactively with conflict requires a shift from event-based intervention to ongoing capacity-building. When leaders integrate the structured, agency-preserving practices of facilitative mediation — slowing reactive exchanges, surfacing underlying interests, and preserving ownership of decisions — with systemic awareness, conflict is no longer treated as an isolated disruption.

### Normalize Creative Tension

Healthy systems require differentiation. Disagreement, when skillfully engaged, enhances strategic clarity and innovation.

### Design Conflict Agreements in Advance

Explicit norms for dissent, repair, and escalation reduce fear and shorten the distance between rupture and repair.

### Measure System Health Rather Than Settlement

After difficult exchanges, leaders can ask:

- Where did trust increase or decrease?
- Where did clarity improve?
- How is the system stronger than before?

These questions shift the metric from resolution alone to systemic strengthening.

## CONCLUSION

Conflict is rarely confined to the issue at hand. It often implicates identity, power, fairness, and responsibility within a broader relational field. Treated narrowly, conflict becomes a contest. Treated systemically, it becomes diagnostic information about alignment, structure, incentives, and unmet needs.

Working with tension while working for the whole requires collective leadership maturity. It asks leaders to regulate reactivity, preserve agency, surface underlying interests, and widen perspective to include the ecosystem affected by how disagreement is handled.

Handled reactively, conflict fragments systems.  
Handled creatively and systemically, it strengthens them.

Working with tension is leadership work.  
Working for the whole is responsibility.

In this sense, conflict is not merely an operational challenge. It is a developmental opportunity — one that reveals and shapes the quality of collective leadership.

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

### Deepening Capacity for Constructive Conflict

The following works have informed this integrated approach and may deepen understanding for those choosing to expand their own conflict capacity. Conflict literacy does not require professional certification in mediation. It requires developmental expansion — an ability to distinguish positions from interests, regulate identity threat, work skillfully with emotion, and widen perspective to include the larger system.

#### Foundations: Interests and Structure

Fisher, Ury & Patton — *Getting to Yes*

Introduces the distinction between positions and interests, objective criteria, and options for mutual gain. Particularly useful for depersonalizing disagreement.

Deborah Kolb — *Everyday Negotiation*

Explores negotiation within subtle power dynamics and everyday leadership contexts. Illuminates how small conversational moves shape larger outcomes.

#### Emotional and Relational Intelligence

Stone, Patton & Heen — *Difficult Conversations*

Examines the emotional architecture beneath conflict and offers a framework for shifting from blame to contribution.

Stone & Heen — Thanks for the Feedback  
Focuses on receiving feedback — often the most common form of everyday conflict — and metabolizing defensiveness constructively.

Thomas Crum — The Magic of Conflict  
Grounded in Aikido principles, reframes conflict as energy that can be redirected rather than resisted. Emphasizes presence and balance.

### Philosophical Grounding

Bush & Folger — The Promise of Mediation  
Articulates empowerment and recognition as central to conflict transformation and moral development.

### Escalation Patterns

The Arbinger Institute — Leadership and Self-Deception  
Explores how internal posture and self-justification fuel conflict escalation.

### Expanding the Systemic Lens

Frederic Laloux — Reinventing Organizations  
Examines how mature organizational cultures handle authority, transparency, and disagreement.

### A Suggested Reading Path

If time is limited, begin with:

- Getting to Yes
- Difficult Conversations
- The Magic of Conflict

To deepen further, add:

- Everyday Negotiation
- Leadership and Self-Deception

Together, these works build cognitive clarity, emotional maturity, embodied regulation, systemic awareness, and practical negotiation skill — without requiring formal mediation training.

## 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.