

The Beauty of Conflict Tools: Dealing with Defensiveness



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Hosts

CrisMarie Campbell and Susan Clarke

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CrisMarie: Welcome to The Beauty of Conflict, a podcast about how to deal with conflict at work, at home, and everywhere else in your life. I'm CrisMarie.

Susan: And I'm Susan.

CrisMarie: We run a company called Thrive Inc. and we specialize in conflict resolution, stress management coaching, and building strong, thriving teams and relationships.

Susan: Now, we know no one likes conflict, not even us and we've written two books on the topic. In our work over the last 20-plus years we've found most people avoid, manage, or diffuse conflict. The problem is when you opt out of conflict in these ways you miss the creativity, the connection, and the possibility that lies in conflict.

CrisMarie: We also know 2020 has been, well, let's face it, a stressful year. And what Susan and I realized is all the tools that we've developed and utilized around conflict apply directly to uncertainty which is what we're living in now.

Susan: In this podcast we have tools, concepts, and interviews that will help you cope with the stress and uncertainty of conflict, of COVID, of social justice issues, and yes, even politics. We hope you'll walk away from this episode with some fresh ideas that change your day, your week, and even your life.

Today we want to give you a simple tool for dealing with defensiveness, whether that's your defensiveness or somebody else's. And I'm CrisMarie.

Susan: And I'm Susan and I know that this is an important one for me because I can fairly regularly get defensive about things that I feel very

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strongly about. I like to call it passionate, but bottom line, I'm sure CrisMarie will vouch for the fact that it can come across as defensive.

CrisMarie: True.

Susan: But let's start with a story.

CrisMarie: Yeah. So we often facilitate working off sites with teams and one example that we came across was there was a CFO, so a Chief Financial Officer, who we had gotten to the part of the off site where we were like, "Hey, if you want to check out your stories," which we have a podcast on that if you don't know that tool. "This is a time to speak up if you've got differences with each other."

And finally the CFO said, "Well, okay, I want to say something to you, Ted," who is a Chief Marketing Officer. And she went on to say, "You drive the team so hard, people can't say no to you, so they hang in and in the end they actually wind up leaving because you're driving them too hard."

Before Ted could respond we kind of intervened and said, "Hey, Ted, this is a great time to reflect back what you're hearing Margaret say before you respond." And he said, "Oh, I will, I will, I will." And then he just went into defense which is so typical. We say, "That wasn't my intention," or, "I think we all drive everybody hard." Or there is all sorts of defensive actions, which is just our ego trying to protect us, rather than actually hearing the feedback or hearing how somebody else is putting the world together.

Susan: Now, that shows up fairly regularly with business teams. I can also – this is Susan, and I also know when I'm working with couples this comes up as well. And right now with all that's going on in the political climate this really, I think, does become even more important. I mean just recently I was working with a couple that have very opposing views on politics. And right now that is...

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CrisMarie: That is going to be tough.

Susan: Yeah. We have just come through two conventions, the Democratic Convention, the Republican Convention. And they are a little bit at odds with each other. And in it I was trying to offer them, you know, because their minds it's like you just don't talk about politics if you want to keep your marriage. That was actually how it came up.

CrisMarie: Well, I think that's how people tend to deal with political issues in relationships, like okay, we have too much of a divide, I can't talk to you about it.

Susan: But the problem is here is this person who you care deeply about who has a very different position than you. And something that right now happens to be fairly vitally important in our country. So that's hard to reconcile. So I think what you're talking about though in sort of like in receiving feedback, the same thing applies in listening to a very different viewpoint.

You could listen and take in the information and reflect back what you think the other person is saying and why it's important to them without ever saying you agree. And that is simply a way to allow for there to at least be an invitation to both be seen and heard for the different positions. And I see, CrisMarie you've got your hand up now so I should probably stop.

CrisMarie: So the tool that we want to highlight is reflective listening. And that means reflecting back the gist, the emotional tone of what this other person is trying to communicate to you without what Susan was saying, without agreeing or disagreeing. You're just – we call it catch the ball. Catch what the other person is saying.

So even with what we then coached Ted to do is say, "Okay Margaret, I hear, from your point of view what you're telling me is I drive people too

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hard, they're committed to me so they do the work and then they leave the organization. And you're concerned about that, is that what you're trying to tell me?" That would be, he hasn't agreed or disagreed. He's just let Margaret know I am hearing what you're trying to tell me. And then seeing does that fit or not. And Margaret can then say yeah or no, clarify it.

Susan: And the same thing in the other situation that I was talking about, somebody who has a very strong difference of opinion, say a political point of view, to try on let me understand why that you have taken the position you've taken. Here's what I think you're telling me. And not get caught up in the actual political aspect of it, but what is the impact of that person personally, why is it important to them? If I can reflect that back I can then keep the relationship and I may be influenced by what they have to say as well, who knows.

CrisMarie: And if you're defensive, when you take the time to reflect back what you're hearing, like if in your head you're saying, "No freaking way," that's what's coming up for you. But if you take the time to reflect back, it allows you to come down your own stress curve, it buys you some time to kind of take a breath, feel your own body, not just jump and defend or attack, which we can do when we're upset.

So, one, it allows the other person to feel heard when you reflect back the gist, not all the details word for word, we're not saying that, but the gist of what somebody's saying, the emotional tone, you settle, they feel heard and there's more of a possibility to bridge that gap.

Susan: And the only piece that I would add to this is if you have a style kind of like my own that can sound fairly passionate. You may want to just add that in the beginning, I realize I'm a little defensive or taken, you know, surprised by your reaction.

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So I might come across as strong, something to let the other person know your intention is to reflect back. And you're kind of starting from a position that may seem a little defended. That that ownership can make a huge difference in helping somebody be able to make space for you to have, come with some force, so come with some energy.

CrisMarie: I think that's a great point Susan, because you're acknowledging where you're at, that I have some reaction over here and I'm still trying to build a bridge to you. I'm still trying to understand how you put the world together even though that seems insane to me, to know how you put the world together.

Susan: And one little last caveat, if you are a couple out there listening to this, whatever you do, do not do the we're getting defensive here.

CrisMarie: We're both getting defensive.

Susan: Because that is just grounds for more defensiveness, even if you both are getting defensive, just own your own defensiveness.

CrisMarie: So I think I really want to highlight, Susan, what you're bringing up is really speak; you're reflecting back but if you're talking about how you're feeling. use I statements, not we or you, but I'm feeling defensive. I'm feeling passionate. I'm feeling whatever is coming up.

Susan: Yeah. And also, this is true on a team too, the worst thing you can do on a team is say, "All of us have talked about you and we really think you're a little too aggressive."

CrisMarie: We all agree that you're too aggressive is the worst thing you can say. Narrow it down to sometimes I find you too aggressive.

Susan: Or too intense.

CrisMarie: Ted or whoever.

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Susan: Yes. Okay, so this is a short tools tip for this week.

CrisMarie: So the challenge for you listeners out there is when you find yourself in a situation where you're like I cannot believe this person is saying that, pause, see if you can reflect back the gist and the emotional tone like, "I get you're frustrated," or, "I get you're really passionate." And also own out loud I am may be defensive right now.

Susan: Yeah, turn it 180, that's another tool we talk about in different times. So anyway, hopefully you'll give this a try and I would encourage you to actually see if, you know, where are some situations where you could practice, because practice is what makes communication better, we generally don't practice.

CrisMarie: Okay, take care and good luck.

Thank you for listening to The Beauty of Conflict podcast. We know conflict, stress and uncertainty can be hard to navigate, so if you want more support you can check out our other resources. We have two books on Amazon.

Susan: Our business book is The Beauty of Conflict: Harnessing Your Team's Competitive Advantage or our couples book, The Beauty of Conflict for Couples. We also have an e-book, How To Discuss Difficult Topics. We'll put the links in the show notes to make it easy for you.

CrisMarie: Also, if you need help with your team at work we regularly conduct team sessions both live and virtually. If you'd like us to speak at your next event or if you want coaching, Susan and I each coach business leaders, individuals, and couples. You can reach us at thrive@thriveinc.com, that's thrive@thriveinc.com.

Susan: If you've enjoyed today's podcast, please take 30 seconds to give us an iTunes review. It helps get this show out to others. Thanks again for

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listening. We hope you have a peaceful, productive, and beautiful day.
Take care of yourself, and we hope you'll join us again for another episode.