

Working the Mind with Jeremy Pollack



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Hosts

CrisMarie Campbell and Susan Clarke

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

Susan Clarke: And I'm Susan. We run a company called Thrive, and we specialize in conflict resolution, communication and building strong, thriving teams and relationships. Conflict shows up in our lives in so many ways. Most people, unfortunately, are not very good at handling conflict. Most people have never been taught the right tools for dealing with conflict, and then it leads to unnecessary friction, arguments, passive aggressive emails, tears, hurtful comments, stuck-ness, all kinds of things we don't want. We're on a mission to change all of that.

CrisMarie Campbell: We've spent the last 20 years teaching our clients how to handle conflict in a whole new way. We're here to show you that conflict doesn't have to be scary and overwhelming. With the right tools, you can turn a moment of conflict into a moment of reinvention. Conflict can pave the way into a beautiful new system at work, a new way of leading your team, a new way of parenting, a new chapter of your marriage where you feel more connected than ever before. Conflict can lead to beautiful things.

CrisMarie Campbell: Today we have a special guest on our show, Jeremy Pollack of Pollack Peacebuilding Systems. He is a colleague of ours. He works in the area of conflict and it is such a treat to talk to somebody in our same field. On today's show he covers the seven cognitive bias. Now, when we recorded this episode it was pre-pandemic.

Susan Clarke: I think that makes it very fascinating to listen to now because things have changed and especially when you start to hear some of these biases and you recognize how it's playing out. I mean, we often talk about the beauty of conflict, but we could easily be talking about the beauty of conflict, change, and crisis which we're in right now. So, I think that adds a special flavor to today's episode.

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CrisMarie Campbell: Some of his biases he talks about are like all or nothing thinking, anchoring bias, fundamental attribution error, confirmation bias, in-group out-group. There's seven of them, but one of the – the in-group out-group what I recognized is this pandemic we are going through it together, the entire world.

Suddenly, it makes us kind of all in one big group so it can transcend boundaries and borders. So, just be listening to this episode thinking about your situation, applying the biases to what you're going through now and I think you'll really enjoy.

Susan Clarke: But I will say, just because we're all in this together doesn't mean there's not conflict. So, let's be clear. We still need to work on how to deal effectively with that conflict.

CrisMarie Campbell: Well, welcome. We have Jeremy Pollack who is the founder of Pollack Peacebuilding Systems, a nationwide conflict resolution consulting firm. He holds a master's degree in evolutionary anthropology. That's a mouthful. As well as a master's degree in negotiation, conflict resolution, and peace building. He's also currently a research fellow at the Stanford Center for Conflict and Negotiation at Stanford University.

So, welcome, Jeremy. We're excited to have you today.

Jeremy Pollack: Thanks, I'm excited to be here.

CrisMarie Campbell: Now, when we were preparing for this, we were looking into what you could bring, and we were fascinated with your seven common cognitive biases that lead to conflict.

Susan Clarke: We are. This is Susan. I just want to interrupt because I do want to know what is evolutionary anthropology.

Jeremy Pollack: Anthropology is, in general, the study of human beings. So, there's different sets of anthropologies, cultural, there's archeological,

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and there's linguistic, and then there's evolutionary, which is synonymous with physical anthropology or biological anthropology. It's basically looking at human beings from an evolutionary perspective. How particular behaviors, cultures, etc. evolved through the paradigm of evolution rather than the cultural anthropology is more through the paradigm of sociocultural perspective.

CrisMarie Campbell: What was your big takeaway from your degree?

Jeremy Pollack: My thesis research was in the evolutionary psychology of group conflict and cooperation. I looked at it in a competitive context where looking at competition as a proxy for conflict as to how that evolved. I think my big takeaway was I really got interested in ingroup and outgroup bias, and how minds are programmed to recognize very minimal markers of membership in groups and determine, "That is in my group, that person is not," and we have all kinds of different groups that we identify with.

So, which groups we identify with, and how we identify, and which members of those groups we identify with and who we don't. Then what that does to our psychology when we recognize, "Hey, that person is in my group," versus, "Hey, that person is not in my group." That's a very interesting topic for me, and that's, I think, probably the biggest thing I took away in studying that.

CrisMarie Campbell: That's actually kind of topical these days even with all the different things that are coming up. Even with me too, and different like who identifies with who.

Jeremy Pollack: Absolutely.

CrisMarie Campbell: It's like the Super Bowl halftime show. You can have an ingroup and an outgroup with that.

Jeremy Pollack: Absolutely. The Super Bowl itself, there's so much research now on this subject with regards to teams, and sports fans, and

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that kind of stuff because it's just such a ripe area of ingroup and outgroup membership.

CrisMarie Campbell: Nationalism even, what country you're from. I can really see that, and the whole city, we want our team to win. That sort of thing.

Jeremy Pollack: Yeah, it's a strange phenomenon that the mind does. There's a thing called minimal group paradigm, and they've done all kinds of research with this, but basically, it shows that you can create the salience of being in a group with just very minimal conditions.

For instance, you could have strangers next to you, and by putting on the same color shirt, it does something to the mind to say, "Hey, we're all suddenly in the same group, and I actually have a bias towards those group members just by putting on a same color shirt even if I know nothing about them." Things like that where just the mind is so sensitive to markers of group membership. It's really interesting.

CrisMarie Campbell: It's so funny because even when I'm traveling, let's say, and I happen to be in a subway car or on a plane, and we are going through similar angst, all of a sudden, we become a group. We have no connection, but we're struggling to get on the plane on time, whatever it is. It's so interesting to watch those memberships form.

Jeremy Pollack: Think about if you were in a foreign country, and you ran into someone on a subway who was also American. You would immediately feel akin to that person even though you don't know them, and they could be from a completely opposite part of the country that if you met them here, you would never think of them as the same group, but because you meet them in that context. So, it's very context dependent too.

CrisMarie Campbell: It sounds like it's really something that happens in our brains that makes all this occur.

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Jeremy Pollack: It's a very deeply evolved cognitive mechanism. There's very sound reasons why it evolved in the mind.

CrisMarie Campbell: Well, it certainly, I'm sure, helped us survive way back when through evolutionary process. Well, let's get to those seven common cognitive biases that you were so generously willing to talk about.

Jeremy Pollack: From a social psychological perspective, the main purposes of the mind is to make sense of the world so that I understand where I'm at in it, and so that it's somewhat predictable so that I can survive, and that's an evolutionary mechanism.

Because we're in this world that's very dynamic, if there's too much information, or there's too little information, it makes sense for the mind to create these little shortcuts. To create a picture of the world even though it doesn't have all the information necessary to do so. In a survival sense, that makes a lot of sense because if I can put a very quick picture together of the world, make a snap judgment, and be protective as a result, then I'll probably survive.

So, that makes sense from an evolutionary perspective, from a survival perspective. Now, the problem with that is that we make these snap judgements. We have these mental heuristics, or these mental shortcuts, that end up creating inaccurate versions of the world. Even though it would help us survive, it can be very disruptive and it can create a lot of conflict.

Susan Clarke: We have such a desire to not have to be in touch with their own sense of uncertainty, helplessness. I think that's part of what you're even saying, is our survival instinct is to figure out how not to be helpless, and in those choices, we try to get control over things, which is one direction. That's a choice. Or we could actually be more vulnerable, but that's actually a different choice that is not as socially acceptable to me.

CrisMarie Campbell: Or even evolutionary.

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Susan Clarke: Really, I think in terms of dealing more effectively with each other, we have to learn how to develop a sense of hanging out in uncertainty and even being willing to stay a little more comfortable in the paradox or the discomfort when we don't have what we think of as safe and controlled, and that's very hard for us.

Jeremy Pollack: It's a really good point. Because we evolve this way, we're so comfortable trying to make sense of the world even when it's not totally accurate, and that's just what the mind does. But I think what your goal is, especially in our field with peace building and conflict resolution, help people transcend our own innate biological mechanisms in order to get to a higher consciousness where we can actually live in mystery of some sort, live in the unknown a little bit, and be comfortable in that uncertainty. That's very difficult, but I think it's part of our jobs.

Susan Clarke: Yes.

CrisMarie Campbell: Yes, slow things down in that sense. In our vernacular, we shortcut it to our personal filter, which is that process of sorting data like, "This is good, this is bad," as a way to survive, and we've done it unconsciously for so long.

Jeremy Pollack: That one would be called dichotomous thinking, black or white, all or nothing, good or bad. A lot of people do that. What I would say is anytime someone says, "Hey, that's right, I'm wrong," or, "You're right, I'm wrong. Bad, good." They use the words like always, never, impossible, perfect. Those kinds of things. It ignores the nuance and complexity of the real world. We're thinking in extremes, and that's dichotomous thinking. That's one bias.

Another bias called anchoring bias, and that's basically where the initial information that someone learns actually sticks, and regardless of any other information that comes in, all of the new information is now framed through that initial anchoring information. So, it creates this illusory frame of reference. The next one would be fundamental attribution error.

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Susan Clarke: Oh, we've talk about that one.

Jeremy Pollack: Yeah, because that's a very common one to think about and talk about, and essentially, means when you do something, I'm going to attribute it to your character as opposed to when I do something, I attributed to the circumstance. So if you act poorly, I'm going to say, "Well, that's just because he's a bad person," or something like that. But if I act poorly, it's all because it was the circumstances that made me. It's not because I'm a bad person. So, that's that fundamental attribution error.

Susan Clarke: That's the real true one, right? Just kidding.

CrisMarie Campbell: That's the right one.

Jeremy Pollack: Yeah, that's the right one. That's true. Exactly. Confirmation bias is another big one that people talk about a lot now these days, basically, only focusing on information that confirms one's beliefs and filtering out or discarding any information that would disconfirm my belief. Another way of thinking of that is selective perception.

Susan Clarke: I think people do that. They talk about this. After you buy something, you really have a confirmation bias.

Jeremy Pollack: Absolutely.

CrisMarie Campbell: You look at all the reasons why this was a really good purchase for me, even though it's really expensive.

Susan Clarke: I think this also speaks to fake news. They hear something that solidifies their bias, and it confirms their bias. Boy does Facebook and various things like that contribute even more to that.

CrisMarie Campbell: Yeah, I would think so. Does that make sense, Jeremy?

Jeremy Pollack: Absolutely. Because people tend to go to the sources of news and that kind of thing that talk in a way and from a perspective that

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they already believe, and so it confirms it, and they really don't want to hear anything that disconfirms it because that makes them, again, very uncomfortable.

It gets back to that what if it is uncertain, what if it is unknown, and that's very uncomfortable. So, people want to know that what they believe and what they know is certain. Having all that confirmation helps. Facebook, and YouTube, and all those algorithms now provide more of what you already look at.

CrisMarie Campbell: That's just fueling our confirmation bias.

Susan Clarke: Yes.

Jeremy Pollack: Absolutely. Well, that's what they're playing on. That's their whole model, is confirmation.

CrisMarie Campbell: Wow. Okay, that's four.

Jeremy Pollack: Yeah, four. Let's see. So, ingroup outgroup bias, which we just talked about, which is basically a preference for one's own group, and then feelings of anger avoidance, fear, disgust, and that kind of thing towards another group, and that also involves stereotyping.

CrisMarie Campbell: Also, because it's so now Republicans and Democrats, it's the vilifying of the outgroup on either side. That's so painful to witness and be a part of.

Jeremy Pollack: Yeah, all these biases play into each other. Let's say I don't want to gain any new information, but I might gain some new information if I listened to an ingroup member. But the minute there's an outgroup member with the same information, I'll just shut that information out because they're part of the outgroup, and I don't trust them. It's a tough situation right now. Well, it's always been actually.

CrisMarie Campbell: Well, I don't know why it seems louder now.

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Jeremy Pollack: It does. It's maybe a product of the media, of just so much media now because we have never been in a world where there's been so much information from so many sources before. I think we're on sixth. Yeah, hostile attribution bias, and that's basically that person is doing what they're doing in order to be malicious towards me, and that's just a lot of times incorrect.

CrisMarie Campbell: Oh, I think so often, even in relationships, even personal relationships, we think they're trying to hurt me, when the other person is just doing what they're doing. This happens at workplaces all the time. They're out to get me.

Susan Clarke: Even with the Myers-Briggs, somebody who's a thinking style versus a feeling style, and nine times out of ten, those two styles could interpret the other one is just making life difficult for them.

Jeremy Pollack: Absolutely.

Susan Clarke: It's a simple version of it, but it's the same idea, hostile intent because you're not being logical. The hostile intent because you're emotional. It's amazing.

Jeremy Pollack: There's a theory called error management theory, which is another deep cognitive mechanism that's not just in humans but really exists in all animal creatures, especially social animals, which basically says better to be wrong about something that's actually safe than wrong about something that's actually dangerous.

So, I'm going to assume that the thing, whatever it is, whether it's a snake, or a spider, some eyes I see in the darkness, or something, I'm going to assume those are dangerous rather than assume they're not and be wrong.

CrisMarie Campbell: Kept us alive when we saw a string, and we thought it was a snake. We jumped back.

Jeremy Pollack: Exactly.

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CrisMarie Campbell: Before we could even think about it, we go through that.

Jeremy Pollack: There's the shortcut.

CrisMarie Campbell: Yes.

Jeremy Pollack: It's just the quick reaction. Now, we do it, and it turns out it creates a lot of conflict when there doesn't need to be conflict.

CrisMarie Campbell: True.

Jeremy Pollack: Then the third that is just worldview bias. So, just recognizing that everything one sees, and knows, and understands about the world has been framed through a personal history, culture, media, family, ideas about what's moral. All your perceptions, essentially, are filtered through this lens of your experience and what you've learned in your life.

CrisMarie Campbell: So, it's like a big world view, just how I put all the pieces together. Is that what you're saying?

Jeremy Pollack: Yeah, it's just like everything I see and how I interpret it, it's all filtered through the lens of what I've learned and experienced in my life from my culture, from my family, from the media I watch, from all that stuff. When I do workshops or presentations on this kind of stuff, I do a few different techniques to help people.

Basically, you can't get rid of your biases. It's basically impossible, but you can be more aware of them, and you can bring them from these unconscious to the conscious at least somewhat, and that helps. Then you can transcend them a little bit into the realms of uncertainty, which is where a lot of peace building begins, I think.

CrisMarie Campbell: Any sort of even prejudice, breaking things down because we're all just human, and we have so much more that's alike than

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different, and helping people recognize that and feel that sense of connection is so powerful.

Jeremy Pollack: Creating that super ordinate group called human being rather than all the other groups that you identify with. If you can do that in a workshop, that's so powerful, but that's a tough one a lot of times. Do you have any thoughts on how to typically do that? Like, "Hey, let's forget about all these groups that you put yourself in, but let's think about being a human with each other."

Susan Clarke: Two things that come to mind for us that have been really powerful. One, even though the mind is such a big part of this, to get people out of just their mind, and into their body, and into their not just paying attention to the cognitive part of themselves is huge.

Actually, I do a lot of work with horses, and the reason I do it is because horses, where they're similar to us is that they're prey animals, and they're very vulnerable, really. They actually rely completely on relationships in nature to keep themselves safe, but so inherently, they actually have a lot higher EQ than we do. They're registering it.

We're very much like them, but we have actually learned a different pathway to interrupt our story. The fact that we can tell ourselves a story and build up these defenses. So, it's really wonderful to get people out with horses, and have them drop in differently, and see the impact of like 90% of our communication is nonverbal, and only 10% is verbal. It's helpful to get people into a different space than just their cognitive thinking.

Jeremy Pollack: Absolutely.

CrisMarie Campbell: Well, what it does is it has them attune. It's like their defenses come down, and that helps them connect with the other people on the team or the other leaders that we're working with. That's a very powerful way.

Jeremy Pollack: That's so interesting.

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CrisMarie Campbell: Yeah, this is more equine coaching, or we call it Equus coaching. We bring it into the leadership trainings that we do, and also the team offsites.

Susan Clarke: Well, one piece about horses, just as information, is of all the beings in the world, they are the fastest to go back to a feral state after trauma. So, basically, they will attune back to their natural instincts, which means actually, being part of a herd, connecting their interconnectedness.

If we could learn that, that would be so huge, and that's what's fascinating about horses, is they have been quite willing to be domesticated. We think we did it to them, but in reality, they've been relational with us for a long time, but they also can very quickly drop back into their natural state, which is what we would hope, I think, a higher consciousness would put us there as well.

CrisMarie Campbell: Yeah, because the little traumas or separations, businesspeople don't like the word trauma, but when we have these little things that happen to us, ingroup outgroup, that's a little T, a little trauma, and that's a separation. The horses help reconnect, and they actually have shown in studies that for even war vets or people that have gone through significant trauma, when they do a scan of their brain, there's dark spots in their brain, and in working with the horses, those dark spots fill back in.

They become more alive. So, it's very powerful because in organizations, there is so much, "Oh, do I belong, or do I not? Am I going to make it? Am I going to not?" We don't recognize how we are harming ourselves in those organizational systems. It can be very powerful to bring something like a horse in that nobody is thinking is really going to work, then it does.

Jeremy Pollack: It sounds like they become models for us in some way.

CrisMarie Campbell: Yeah, and they're instantaneous biofeedback machines that they read your heart rate, your respiratory rate, and so if you're being incongruent, they're like, "You're not safe," and they walk away. So, if I'm anxious, and I actually am willing to say, "Oh, I am

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anxious,” then they're like, “Okay, you're safe,” and they join up as you're the leader, which you think about humans.

When somebody is really congruent, we feel it and can tell, and for some reason, we trust them more. We may not be consciously aware of it, and you might have the brain science around it, but it seems like that's something that's going on in the background.

Jeremy Pollack: Yeah, that's why authentic leadership styles are so important. It kind of reminds me of something else that I've been thinking about, is helping individuals return or remember or their sense of their own very primal power. I think a lot of people get into conflict because they get defensive, and the defensiveness arises from the sense that they feel entrapped, or they feel that they don't have power in the situation, they don't have choice in the situation, and they've just forgotten that they really are a powerful being.

CrisMarie Campbell: We completely agree.

Susan Clarke: Yes.

Jeremy Pollack: Because I haven't ever done equine coaching or anything like that, but when I'm around horses, I feel in awe of their power, and it brings me back to my own sense of primality in a sense.

CrisMarie Campbell: That primality, is that connecting human energy that you're probably connecting to in that place.

Jeremy Pollack: I see when people connect to that very organic and raw nature, and they feel powerful, all the things that they were so worried about and defensive about, they wash away because they realized that “Hey, no one can take away my power even though it feels that way right now.”

CrisMarie Campbell: Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

Jeremy Pollack: I've got to get out with some horses soon.

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CrisMarie Campbell: Yes, come up to Montana. We'll take you out. We can work in any barn across the United States, but it's nice to get people here to Montana.

Jeremy Pollack: Yeah, I got to get to get to Montana for sure.

CrisMarie Campbell: Well, why don't you tell our listeners what you do, how people can connect to you.

Jeremy Pollack: My company, essentially, we help companies navigate conflict, so we help them navigate both acute conflicts between individuals and also organizational or systemic conflict. If there's issues within the culture of the organization, we can help assess and intervene in different ways. Then we also do a lot of training, and coaching, and that kind of thing. For more information, you can go to our website, which is pollackpeacebuilding.com.

CrisMarie Campbell: Excellent. Well, you've been delightful to have on our podcast, and maybe we'll have you back for your second topic that we didn't get to.

Susan Clarke: I know, because there's so many things that could carry on and keep this conversation going. CrisMarie says it's a commute. I call it a run, and I really don't run for more than 30 minutes. So, if I go over that, then it's testing me.

CrisMarie Campbell: Thank you so much, Jeremy. If you want to get in touch with him, pollockpeacebuilding.com.

Well, that was a treat to have Jeremy on.

Susan Clarke: We so rarely get to talk to someone who's really doing a lot of the same work we are, and it was interesting to hear him share some of his own stories and also how he works.

CrisMarie Campbell: Those seven cognitive biases, really, and we were talking about this even after the episode together, we're not going to get rid

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of these biases, but the more we can do to help people, ourselves included, be aware, “Hey, I’m in my bias,” and then even owning it at that point, can help shift.

Susan Clarke: Yes. It was great to talk to him, and we realized that we could probably talk more, so we might just have him back on again at another point. You could see in the show notes ways to get in touch with him, and we look forward to hearing how this was for you.

CrisMarie Campbell: Take care.

If you want to learn more about what we discussed today, or how to deal with conflict more effectively, Susan and myself, CrisMarie, are both available for individual one-on-one coaching. We also offer couples coaching, which now, as we live and work 24/7 together, may be more important than ever.

Susan Clarke: We continue to do our team facilitation both live and now virtually. Let’s get real. Until you’ve had a tough conversation over Zoom, you may not be building the trust you need on your team. For the next couple of months, we are offering free virtual trainings to organizations. Our goal is to support you, your team, and your business both at work and at home during this pandemic.

CrisMarie Campbell: Right now, you can find short videos on my, CrisMarie’s, LinkedIn and Facebook with tips, tools, and inspiration. To contact us, email thrive@thriveinc.com. That’s thrive@thriveinc.com

Susan Clarke: Okay, stay safe, stay healthy, and remember, together we’re better and stronger.

CrisMarie Campbell: Take care.