

# Reflections of Eliane S. Markoff

Bentley University Ombuds



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“I very much appreciate the exquisite facilitation skills and [Eliane’s] commitment to enabling this university to reach its full potential.”

Anonymous

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## Introduction

It has been my great pleasure to serve as your Ombuds since 2018.

During the past several years at Bentley, I have been given the privilege to mediate, conduct workshops and provide you with advice to empower you to constructively resolve conflicts on your own. It has been especially rewarding to receive feedback on the progress many of you achieved after a challenging situation. Learning that someone has taken the time to resolve a conflict, apologize for being unfair, or change behavior to become more collaborative and trusting is invaluable and fulfilling.

Which brings me to the purpose of this booklet. I encourage each of us to reach out to our colleagues to express our gratitude, seek greater understanding, accept accountability, apologize when appropriate, forgive, resolve conflicts, big and small, and connect in a meaningful way. I look forward to continuing our collaboration so we can keep on building a community of respect, care and understanding, consistent with Bentley's core values.

My warm regards, Eliane Markoff

## Emotional Intelligence to Manage and Resolve Conflicts

As Ombuds for Bentley University, I appreciate the vital role emotional intelligence can play in our ability to constructively manage and resolve conflict.

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is the ability to understand and manage emotions, both our own and the emotions of people with whom we are interacting. The key elements to EI are self-awareness, motivation, empathy and social skills.

Self-awareness is consciously knowing one's own feelings. Self-regulation is the ability to control impulses and focus on the desired outcome. Motivation is the reason we behave in a certain way. Empathy is the ability to place oneself in another person's shoes and feel their emotions. Social skills help us communicate effectively, express ourselves clearly and be patient and good listeners.

If we lack certain social skills, we can learn them if we are motivated to improve our emotional intelligence. We can practice being better listeners and better communicators. We can avoid interrupting others when they speak and summarizing back to them what they shared with us.

This social skill assures them that we are listening, and we empathize with what they say, even if we do not always agree. Being heard and acknowledged is a key step in addressing a conflict.

I have witnessed conflict resolution achieved by the mere fact that individuals were reassured to be at least heard and their views understood.

We can be open-minded and welcome different opinions. We can thank them for sharing their views, and if appropriate, let them know that we learned a new perspective.

We can be more empathetic by allowing others to speak and express their concerns and by responding in a reassuring and respectful way.

We can be more humble and share our mistakes with others and how we have used them as teaching moments. We can place our egos aside and ask others to help when we need it.

We can forgive when someone apologizes, and we can apologize when we act unfairly or offend others even if done unintentionally.

**“When awareness is brought to an emotion, power is brought to your life.”**

Tara Meyer-Robson



## The Value of Active Listening

The power of listening, genuinely hearing, and acknowledging concerns is a critical and valuable skill to adopt during a conflict.

Productive conversations in any situation, and especially during a conflict, can only occur with active listening. Active listening means giving your full attention to what the other party is saying, not just verbally but also nonverbally. It requires empathy, asking questions and giving your full sincere attention.

Non-verbal cues include eye contact and acknowledging what is being communicated, such as nodding and assuring the party is being heard. These signals convey attentiveness and understanding, reinforcing the message that the other party's concerns are being heard.

Below are some guidelines to consider:

**Be empathic:** Try to keep an open mind and put yourself in the other person's shoes and try to understand their emotions, perspectives and concerns. When we empathize, we validate the other party's feelings, which is a significant step towards regaining respect and trust and allowing the other party to be motivated to collaborate for a mutually beneficial resolution.

**Ask questions the right way:** Ask the other party to elaborate on the concerns by asking open-ended questions. This may give you clarification on their concern, learn more about the underlying issues and concerns and will also confirm that you are sincerely interested in understanding their perspective. Make sure you do not interrupt even if you do not agree. You can always express your concern afterwards and especially after acknowledging their concern.

**Accept accountability:** Step back, place your ego aside and ask yourself: could I have contributed to the conflict in some way. The answer is most likely in the affirmative. Admit that to the other party and be humble. If you feel comfortable, apologize. Let them know you take some responsibility and want to move forward in a more positive and collaborative way.



**Jointly come up with possible solutions:** If you have a recommendation on how to address the conflict and proceed in a more collaborative way, share it by asking the other party if you can give a suggestion. It is very critical to ask the other party as well if they have a suggestion they can present.

**Agree to check your progress:** When you agree on your suggestion(s) for resolution, it is always a good practice to continue communicating to evaluate progress. If you are hesitant about the other party's suggestion yet highly value the relationship, try to keep an open mind and consider it in case it may indeed be a successful one. Remember, you will have a chance to evaluate it.

In summary, active listening will play a critical role in rebuilding respect, trust and in resolving challenging situations.

## Using Core Values to Resolve Conflict

Each one of Bentley's core values creates a landscape for the resolution of conflict in a constructive and respectful manner.

Let us start with caring and respect as examples of two core values which will aid in the resolution of any challenging situation, not limited to conflict.

A valuable action to help resolve a conflict is to imagine oneself in the shoes of that person. You may be hurt or annoyed or frustrated with someone's behavior, yet keeping an open mind and trying to understand the reason for that behavior may play a crucial role in achieving a resolution.

Many conflicts occur because of assumptions we make based on our own past experiences. We are all different with unique experiences and we do not always think the same. Our backgrounds are different. Our histories are different. We come from diverse backgrounds (i.e., race, religion, nationality, ethnicity and gender identity). We react differently. Our intentions may be noble, yet our behavior may not reflect them.

A colleague coming across as bossy and controlling may have only intended to be helpful. It may also be true that the way the colleague went about helping was not the most effective one. You can learn the reason for the bossy and controlling behavior by caring enough to let the person know, in an honest and constructive way, how such behavior affected you.

Caring enough to understand the other person's point of view by keeping an open mind can go a long way to resolving, or at least managing, conflict. You may be pleasantly surprised and become less angry once you learn the basis of the other person's point of view or behavior. An additional benefit is that what you discover could become a valuable learning experience.

Parties often feel relieved, or at least less angry and annoyed, knowing that the other party understands their viewpoint and circumstances even without arriving at the desired resolution. Just knowing that the other party cared enough to listen and show respect in the process can become a turning point.

After showing care and respect while acknowledging and understanding different views, collaboration helps us jointly identify the next steps available to move forward in a more positive and cooperative manner.

Showing empathy and kindness towards someone who disappointed us or hurt our feelings may motivate that person to express remorse and evoke an apology. The impact a respectful response can have on the party who offended you can be a positive one and one that may make that person more aware of their behavior's impact on you. Many times, individuals who have faced conflict in the past can develop a stronger relationship after handling a challenging situation effectively.

Bentley's core values define how we expect to behave with each other, with our partners and with other stakeholders. They can also guide us in resolving conflict by addressing challenging situations in a positive and constructive manner.

## Value of Reframing in Conflict Resolution

I use reframing in my practice to help us see situations in a different light and from a different perspective. It is a technique that can help us view conflict in a less painful and negative way. It also helps us avoid honest misunderstandings or incorrect assumptions. In addition, it allows us to clarify the issue(s) and to elicit true intentions which can highlight similar goals to help us collaborate in resolving a conflict. In most cases, resolving conflicts is a main component of conflict management. Another component is maintaining respectful and good relationships.

As a mediator, I frequently rely on reframing to help parties achieve a mutually beneficial resolution.

I admit that reframing is not always easy. When we have been hurt or offended, emotions can run high, challenging our ability to think clearly and behave productively to reframe the issue and see a different perspective. Yet, that may be the best strategy to facilitate resolution. All parties need to see the anger or hurt being felt. We tend to feel better after demonstrating emotion. It is important not to minimize the pain or anger. The other party can also benefit from seeing such emotions expressed and hopefully demonstrate acknowledgement and empathy.

There are several ways to display our emotions, but only a few ways that help increase the chances of a mutually beneficial resolution.

One is to make sure that the other person's behavior and actions are interpreted the way that the person intends. We may have assumed incorrectly, jumping to an unfounded conclusion. But if that is not the case, calmly and clearly communicate the disappointment or frustration. It is important to let the party know how their actions or behavior affects you including how upset they made you feel.

A second way is to avoid assigning labels to people. Instead, concentrate on their action and behavior and avoid calling them inconsiderate or selfish. You can reframe and state how their behavior was selfish or inconsiderate. If applicable, let them know how you appreciated a previous action on their part that you found selfless and considerate. This will give them a better frame of reference.

Lastly, I suggest that you discuss the issue further because you may have ideas that will help you both move forward. Advocate for collaboration now so the other party knows how you feel.



## Creating an Infrastructure of Good Conflict

For some of us, the expression “good conflict” might be confusing. How can the words “good” and “conflict” appear together in the same phrase?

My experience as a mediator and an ombuds convinces me that the juxtaposition can indeed be justified. Not only do these two words have the potential to be used in the same sentence, but I will go as far as to state that they should be in the same sentence.

Conflict in the workplace or anywhere is inevitable. We are human. We make mistakes. We annoy others. We offend others. We may be oblivious to how our behavior impacts others. We make assumptions. We are often not aware of someone’s “hot buttons,” and sometimes lack the necessary diplomacy to adequately address a challenging situation with others. We have feelings. We are emotional. We are insecure about certain matters. We often lack the confidence to address conflict, and we especially may lack the know-how to resolve conflict with a mutually beneficial result.

Yes, conflict has the potential to be disruptive and even destructive. It can easily demotivate, negatively impact the work environment, result in low morale and a toxic environment which can even lead to lawsuits, all of which are quite unwelcome outcomes.

Here we focus on how to best utilize conflict to our advantage. It provides some practical and easy-to-understand steps that can increase our chances of benefiting from conflict. It will also provide recommendations on how to manage and leverage the benefits of conflict within teams.

Conflict can be internal or external. Internal conflict can lead to cognitive dissonance when one’s actions or expressed views do not align with one’s values and beliefs. For example, take a person who supports gun control laws but works for a company that manufactures parts used in gun

What is conflict? Conflict originates from the Latin word *conflingere*, which means coming together for a fight or a battle. Coming together is an interesting way to introduce a battle or a fight; in other words, a conflict.

production. Why am I helping make guns when I strongly support gun control? Despite their deeply held personal beliefs, they could try to justify their work because they need the money; it’s the only job available in their hometown; or the job is close to their parents’ house, allowing for more family visits. But these rationalizations mask the conflict that will remain within them until they either leave their job or change their values and beliefs; the former is more likely to occur. An external conflict involves more than one individual and usually takes the form of a disagreement. It could be a disagreement over a specific issue, objective, goal or a plan to best accomplish a task.

The individuals may agree on the desired result sought but disagree on the strategy and steps needed to achieve it. This is often referred to as a substantive conflict. If a conflict is not substantive, it is an emotional one. An emotional conflict often involves incompatible personalities. We find someone’s perfume objectionable; or we do not appreciate a person chewing gum while speaking; or without realizing it, we feel jealous of or intimidated by a colleague.

External conflicts can arise when team members collaborate to complete a project requiring contributions from several individuals. We may not respect comments or ideas presented by one team member. We may not appreciate a team member missing a deadline. We may not appreciate

someone who is regularly tardy to meetings or does not come at all. We may not appreciate someone being distracted by phone calls and emails during a meeting. We may get annoyed by a team member suffering from “restless legs syndrome.” Or we may hold a grudge merely because someone reminds us of a person who has hurt us in the past.

The reasons can be as numerous as our imagination allows.

When we are new to a team, the inclination may be to avoid conflict by staying silent, hoping that our team members will become more responsible,

and annoyances will disappear with time. But is that realistic? Will our passivity cause team members to be prompt, meet their commitments, listen to others without interrupting, and devote their undivided attention to the meeting at hand without allowing themselves to be distracted by emails, text messages or phone calls? More likely, those annoyances will not disappear, and our unwillingness to address them head-on only makes us more annoyed, even angry, escalating the situation to a more serious conflict that could have been avoided with our earlier and diplomatic intervention. No matter the severity of the conflict, it is usually best to address it early and head on.



## Exercise: Identifying and Resolving Potential Conflicts

One way to prepare for conflict within a team is to brainstorm potential situations of conflict and their challenges, even if they never occur. Conducting a brainstorming session to identify possible conflicts is also an excellent way to come together and connect with team members to build trust, increase collaboration and thereby increase the probability of a successful outcome if a real conflict occurs. Brainstorming in this context is effective because it is done without the inevitable interference of emotion and ego which often arises when a real conflict is confronted. This exercise also allows us to incorporate and confront our own past experiences, personal fears or insecurities and past mistakes; things we should never be ashamed of but instead learn from. For example, a team member may describe how being ignored at a meeting impacted his motivation and self-confidence team members may then become more sensitive to this situation if it arises in the future, enabling them to avoid or de-escalate a potential clash.

Another example may be a team member's concern over a lack of transparency. Perhaps as a member of a previous team, they were never provided with constructive feedback that would have benefited them. They express this concern in a brainstorming session with their current team. Their new team members now appreciate the importance of constructive feedback and will better understand how to motivate and work with them more effectively. In my experience, individuals whose constructive feedback we do not appreciate at the time, may indeed be those who help us the most. Admittedly, sometimes the way the feedback is presented is not always helpful; it may have been given in a destructive or negative way. However, as difficult as it may be, if we can put aside the method of delivery and focus on the message itself, we will often benefit.

During this brainstorming exercise, each team member may want to share information on their conflict style. Does it tend to be one that is competitive, collaborative, accommodating or avoiding? If a certain style has negatively affected our success or ability to achieve our goal effectively, this may be a good time to share our style with team members. This is especially important if we know we want to learn to become less competitive, more collaborative or accommodating, characteristics that could have benefited us in the past. Self-awareness of our past "failures" and weaknesses can be the basis of more future success starting today.

There are several exercises and role plays we can conduct to practice different conflict styles, depending on the situation. Other steps can be taken to prepare us to constructively address situations of conflict. Below are some suggestions for a team exercise:

- Create a project plan with specific tasks and specific deadlines.
- Identify the role each team member will play in accomplishing the goals.
- Identify and agree on the success metrics; identify required support or resources needed to ensure success metrics are met.
- Agree on how to best handle the potential situations of conflict, even if they never occur, including specific steps to be taken to remedy conflicts should they arise.

Each team member should consider doing the following:

- Articulating the reasons the team project is of interest.
- Identifying resources or support needed to accomplish the assigned task(s) successfully.
- Listing any potential concerns and engaging other team members to help mitigate them.

The following is a list of best practices you can use to address conflict:

### 1. Start the Conversation:

- Begin the conversation early. Learn to recognize and not ignore the early stage of a conflict.
- Meet in person.
- Place your ego aside; focus on what you need to achieve.
- Listen and acknowledge what you hear and allow the other person to express his or her concern; do not interrupt.
- Explain how the conflict is affecting you and your ability to achieve your goals. Use the word "I" and not "you."

### 2. Get in the Proper Mindset:

- Articulate what you would like to see happen.
- Focus on the relationship and your common goals.
- Put yourself in the other person's shoes.

### 3. Work Toward a Resolution:

- Make suggestions on ways to work toward a resolution.
- Ask the other party to suggest ways to come to a resolution.
- Focus on how a resolution can benefit both parties.
- Be positive and envision a resolution.
- Keep an open mind and consider other creative possibilities.

### 4. Tips to Remember:

- Beware of assumptions; they may be wrong.
- Be willing to apologize.
- Be willing to forgive.
- Be willing to accept change.
- Be willing to let go.

As you reflect on your prior experiences with conflict, consider the following two questions:

- What is the relationship between an apology and respect?
- What is the relationship between risk taking and trust?

Conflict exists both personally and professionally. When addressed and handled properly in a timely fashion, it can have several benefits to individuals, teams and organizations. Some of these benefits include a better understanding of one another, mutual respect, more creative ideas, greater personal satisfaction, increased motivation, a higher chance of success and elevated productivity.

## The Conflict Resolution Process

- 1 Preparation and Prevention
  - Brainstorm Potential Conflicts
  - Understand Perspectives and Styles
  - Create a Framework
- 2 Starting the Conversation
- 3 Reframing the Conflict
- 4 Getting in the Right Mindset
- 5 Working Toward a Resolution
- 6 Building Mutual Respect
- 7 Leveraging Core Values
- 8 Taking Action
- 9 Reflection and Growth



# Recommended Steps for Informal Mediation

Mediation is important because it provides a structured yet informal way for leaders to address disputes, reduce tension and foster collaboration within teams. By creating a safe and neutral environment, mediation enables open communication, mutual understanding and the development of shared solutions. It helps rebuild trust, ensures fair outcomes and empowers parties to resolve conflicts constructively, strengthening relationships and promoting a harmonious workplace.

## Preparing for an Informal Mediation

As chairs of academic departments, leaders and managers, you see great accomplishments by your faculty, employees and colleagues as the result of strong collaborative initiatives and great connections.

Sometimes, however, you may experience a disagreement or dispute between staff members in your organization or faculty in your department. You see and feel tension between them affecting other members in the department.

As the leader, you want to be a peacemaker and smooth the tension. You need to reconcile differences and bridge the gap.

In other words, you may feel you need to conduct informal mediation, but you are not a mediator.

This article is an informal introduction to the mediation process. It is not the type that a mediator would conduct between parties that have already or may soon engage in a more formal dispute resolution process such as arbitration or litigation. It is an article that may help you, as a leader, feel confident when addressing potential disputes and misunderstandings within your department.

Let us assume there is a dispute between two faculty members or two staff members in your department.

## You, as the informal mediator, will contact each party separately to:

- Lay the ground rules for when, where and how the mediation will be conducted including:
  - Select the date of the mediation
  - Choose a neutral location for the mediation
  - Advise that communications solely with mediator are considered privileged and confidential
- Confirm the reason for the conflict
- Understand how it is affecting them
- Ask them for the desired outcome
- Ask them to differentiate between what they would like and what they need
- Identify any common goals for both parties to highlight the benefits of a resolution and understand how they are willing to compromise/ collaborate
- Recommend that if successful, the mediation should result in a written agreement between the parties



## Begin the Meeting:

- Compliment them for agreeing to meet.
- Highlight any common goals and positive aspects of the relationship.
- Explain the guidelines:
  - » Respectful communications
  - » No interruptions
  - » Highlight the benefits of a mutually agreed upon resolution
- Each party spends two to three minutes expressing their position and why they feel there is a conflict.
- The mediator will let each party know that it is very important that each side's position is regarded respectfully and without interruption, even if they do not agree. Each will be given equal time to speak.
- The mediator will also ask them to avoid labeling or blaming the other party, and instead, focus on expressing how the behavior or an action affects them individually. The mediator will ask each party to share their perspective of what happened and their concerns.
- After each party has spoken and shared their concerns, the mediator will ask them both to repeat what they heard. This ensures a clear understanding of the other party's concerns and position. Also, repeating the other party's concerns plays a key role in the process, because the parties are assured that their voices have been heard, a critical step in coming closer to a resolution.
- The mediator may place the parties in separate rooms and conduct shuttle diplomacy to enable each party to voice their concerns with the mediator privately and in confidence.
- With the parties together in the same room, the mediator will then ask each party to highlight some of the benefits of a resolution.



- The mediator will then ask each party to identify what each would like to see as a reasonable outcome for both.
- The mediator will facilitate but not force any decisions on the parties. It is critical that the mediator creates the landscape for the parties themselves to come to a resolution.
- The mediator can ask questions to get them to move forward and achieve a resolution but should not decide for them. Once they have achieved a resolution, the mediator can summarize the main points in writing and give a copy to each to sign.

## Final Comments

The mediator will congratulate the parties for resolving the conflict and may ask them to envision next steps. The mediator may also ask them to share their views about the process. This step can help rebuild trust to empower both parties to move forward in a more collaborative way.

## Follow Up

The mediator may also ask the parties if they would like to meet again in a few weeks to speak about their progress. This step increases the chance of a greater commitment to the agreed resolution.

## Respectful Disagreements

We can easily agree that we all have different views, and we all have different experiences.

When attending a meeting or having a conversation with colleagues, the time will come when we do not agree with something that is said by a colleague or do not see the value in their suggestion. When we disagree with a suggestion or a statement made, it is helpful to remember these things:

- No matter how anxious and eager we are to interrupt; we can benefit from the patience displayed by just listening. We benefit by expressing respect for others' views and by gaining their trust. We can also benefit from a different point of view, and we may even be pleasantly surprised to learn something new. We allow ourselves to question our own assumptions and gain an appreciation of different views. Even if we still do not agree, listening is critical, especially if you value and wish to retain a relationship.
- Disagreement is not disrespectful unless expressed in a hurtful manner. People can agree to disagree with civility.
- If you do not agree with someone, consider repeating what that person said to make sure you correctly understand its meaning. Repeating and summarizing what you heard or think you heard will ensure they have been heard and understood correctly. Sometimes people feel their suggestions are not understood properly and as a result, may feel rejected out of hand. One of the biggest mistakes one can make is to attack the other person's viewpoint on personal grounds.
- Once they feel they have been heard, try to find common ground. If there is none, calmly state that your view is different than theirs and share your reasoning. After you state your reasoning, offer an idea for a mutually beneficial solution. Both parties may be willing to compromise to ensure their relationship is not negatively impacted.

- In the event that no agreement is reached, and time is not of the essence, you can respectfully agree to disagree and revisit the matter later. That allows both parties to walk away valuing each other's views and maintaining a respectful relationship.
- If it is a manager's or superior's suggestions or views you disagree with and the timing is not critical, it is best to listen and wait a day or two before expressing your contrary view or disagreement. This will give you time to reflect on the manager's views or suggestions and possibly find common ground. If you still find the manager's view or suggestion objectionable, reach out respectfully to ask permission to present an alternative way while expressing your commitment to do what is best for the organization.

I hope this will help as you face the unavoidable but healthy disagreements that are part of a growing and changing environment.



## Voicing Concerns the Right Way

*Voice Your Concerns with Purpose: Speak Up, Offer Solutions and Drive Positive Change*

No matter where we work, we will have concerns about how things are done or how decisions are made. This is especially true if we are passionate about our work and our goals.

Expressing our perspective and ideas is critical for many reasons, among them the well-being of the organization, its people and mission.. But are we problem-solvers or complainers?

Many times, we want to express our concerns in a constructive manner but do not always succeed. Instead, we run the risk of being viewed as complainers. The possibility of being seen as a complainer can have a negative impact independent of how reasonable and sound our concerns may be.



Below are a few suggested steps to consider when expressing and voicing a concern. These steps should increase the chances of a more effective outcome:

- **Announce that you have a concern** that you would like to share with the group and respectfully ask to be heard. Allow others to be open to hearing your concern. Make sure your timing is appropriate. Expressing concerns should not occur when angry but only after you have reflected on the main reasons for them and how the group can help address them.
- **Be positive, specific and objective.** Why is the concern important to you, your group or the organization? How is it affecting you? How is it impacting the goals and the mission of the group? Can you think of something positive to express before you state your concern? It could be as simple as stating your commitment to the well-being of the organization and/or mentioning another recent Reach Out Initiative that has benefited the group.
- **Be a problem solver**, not simply a complainer: Make suggestions on how the situation can be mitigated and/ or improved.
- **Suggest success metrics** to evaluate progress.
- Keep an open mind and be flexible as you engage others who provide you with feedback.
- **Remember to thank the group** for giving you the opportunity to voice your concern.

## Admitting Mistakes

*Admit Your Mistakes: Show Courage, Embrace Growth and Build Stronger Relationships*

So much time and so many dollars can potentially be saved with only one simple action: admitting a mistake that might avoid anger, resentment and frustration.

What is a mistake? The definition of the word includes a misunderstanding, inadequate knowledge, an inaccurate comment, a miscalculation, a faux pas, an oversight, a misinterpretation and a misreading, among many other definitions.

We all make and will continue to make mistakes. Some will be minor and others major. One imperative for all of us is that mistakes need to be admitted, and it takes courage to overcome our own egos that can hold us back from taking that step.

Many times, we are not aware of a mistake when making it. It is in retrospect that we realize we made an error. We had good intentions and thought we were doing the right thing, but it was a mistake, nevertheless.

The first step in correcting a mistake is admitting it as soon as we become aware of it. By doing so, we demonstrate self-confidence and self-respect. We demonstrate our willingness and ability to learn from our mistakes and move forward stronger than before. In doing so, we abide by many of our core Bentley values: learning, honesty, respect, caring and collaboration. We also are being true to ourselves and will avoid an internal conflict.

I recently served as the mediator for two colleagues. It was very apparent to me that both parties were responsible for the dispute they now faced. To jumpstart a possible resolution to their conflict, I asked each party one question in confidence. I assured them that I was not there to judge, but to help each resolve the conflict. I also expressed to them that often the biggest lessons learned are triggered by acknowledging a mistake.

I asked each the following question: In retrospect, if you were to undo one action that may have contributed to the conflict with your colleague, what would it be?

Answers usually serve as an opening for effective mediation. Those who can find no action that caused the conflict should reevaluate their answer. They may not be at fault because of their actions, but how about their reactions?

Admitting a mistake is a critical step in resolving a conflict. The ability to own up to a misstep or failure can help move forward the resolution process.



## Value of an Apology

*Apologize with Strength: Heal Relationships, Build Trust and Find Forgiveness*

My hope is that this brief article may serve as a guide to those who are struggling with the word “apology,” or to be more precise, with the act of apologizing.

The irony is that many people believe that apologizing makes a negative impact on them. They are worried their apology shows them as weak or insecure, and depending upon the circumstances, that it may be used against them in the future. For the great majority of the time, however, these concerns are unfounded.

Taking the step to apologize, express regret, or ask for forgiveness is always the most honorable and noble gesture to make when we have wronged someone else. We all make mistakes in life. The irony is that they are often also the reason for our success in life. The pain of our mistakes motivates us to do better and not repeat them. Although certain mistakes cannot be corrected, many can with a simple and sincere apology.

One of the biggest mistakes people made is to try and cover them up. We do that by not being true to ourselves and to others. We rationalize our mistakes with false narratives that some of us end up believing. All that just to avoid an apology. The unfortunate truth is some of us don't have enough self-confidence to apologize.

To enable the apology to break through, sometimes we need to put our egos aside. We need to appreciate that in most situations, an apology

will not only allow us to gain respect, but it also can create a stronger bond with the other party. Convincing ourselves that we were not wrong does not make us appear stronger to others; it is self-defeating and only creates an internal conflict that can make us weaker.

When faced with a situation that requires an apology, ask yourself:

- What will making an apology cost me?
- What benefits may accrue after the apology?
- What costs may I incur after an apology?

There will be scenarios that unfortunately escalate to the point where an apology is no longer effective. Often one hears:

- “If only they had apologized earlier, I never would have pursued this action.”
- “All I wanted was for them to express regret for how they treated me during that meeting.”
- “I am not really looking for financial compensation, I just wanted them to express remorse for the pain they caused me.”

If you have wronged someone, I encourage you to find the courage and confidence to sincerely express regret, apologize and let them know it will not happen again. But if you unknowingly wrong someone, explain to the other party your honest mistake when it does come to your attention.

An apology can be liberating, and the most valued part of an apology is that it often results in forgiveness, a priceless gift that we should all give ourselves.

## Key Element of Success: Failure

The pressure is always here for us to succeed. We want to show our accomplishments.

We want to be proud and happy and make our leaders and mentors proud. We want to get that promotion. We want to feel good about our contributions. We want to share our success with our families and friends. But if we fail, we can feel shame, anger, embarrassment and a loss of self-confidence.

But there is hope, despite the failures we will inevitably face in the future.

Success includes vision, determination, courage, attitude, focus, self-confidence and research.

But the most critical element for eventual success is failure. Why is that?

There is a close correlation between the intensity of pain from failure and the value of lessons learned from failure. Unfortunately, it may take some time to reach that realization. Regrettably, we often view failure as an end rather than an important step on the path to eventual success.

Some of the most successful people have experienced painful and repeated failures. Our failures are an inevitable part of our development and growth. Below you may find surprising some examples of individuals who experienced failure:

- Michael Jordan was one of the best basketball players of all times. He was cut from his high school team.
- Walt Disney was fired from his job at a newspaper early in his career. The reason given? He lacked imagination.
- Albert Einstein's permanent school record disparagingly labeled him "slow."
- Oprah Winfrey was fired from an early job as a television news anchor.
- Bill Gates dropped out of Harvard and started Traf-O-Data, a business that failed.
- Vera Wang failed to qualify for the 1968 U.S. Olympic Team in figure skating.
- Jerry Seinfeld was booed off stage in his first stand-up comedy appearance.
- Elvis Presley was fired from the Grand Ole Opry and was told to go back to truck driving.

If you experience failure, there is some comfort in knowing that you are in good company. Whether it relates to not achieving goals, making a mistake that kills a project, or not getting an anticipated promotion, you can reframe the failure and learn from it to move forward with more courage, hope and greater success.

**"It's fine to celebrate success but it is more important to heed the lessons of failure."**

Bill Gates



## Accepting Change

*Embrace Change: Adapt, Grow, and Unlock New Opportunities for Success*

Whether change in the workplace is welcomed or not, most would agree that it is inevitable. Admittedly, it could be disruptive and painful for both employees and managers.

Leaving our comfort zones can be anxiety producing and disruptive, especially in the short term. However, change can also lead to personal growth and greater job satisfaction for both employees and managers.

If change is welcomed, employees become engaged and even excited to move forward as they implement a new strategy and meet the shared goals ahead.

If change is not welcomed, employees will express their anxiety in several ways, such as missing the old ways, questioning the change and feeling insecure about their role.

Then after a period of adjustment, employees often come around to express acceptance, although perhaps reluctantly. They may understand the need for the change and accept it. They realize their role is still critical. They enjoy their job and want to adapt to the change.

Managers can be very focused as they begin to launch and implement the new strategy and may innocently overlook certain necessary steps during the organizational change. One of these forgotten steps is acknowledging and addressing the anxiety of the employees. Managers could benefit from first acknowledging the potential for disruption and the deep concerns employees may have. Managers can justify and defend change, but only after expressing sensitivity to the impact it may have on employees. Empathy goes a long way to gain the trust and engagement of employees. It can play a key role in implementing change effectively. Here are some suggestions for managers to facilitate the change they desire:

- Encourage communication and be sincere in wanting to learn and understand employees' concerns;
- Consider sharing one of your concerns about the change and engage them in helping address all concerns, including yours. This could play a key role in engaging them and securing their trust;
- Communicate clearly the specific changes and how they will impact them;

- Share your vision and strategy;
- Solicit and incorporate their suggestions;
- Reassure them that this is a joint effort. Their success is your success and vice-versa; and
- Highlight and praise their past successes and accomplishments.

Employees can easily jump to the conclusion that change will be painful and negative. Before jumping to that conclusion:

- Understand the reason for the change
  - » Why did the change occur?
  - » What advantages may result from the change?
- Focus on your job and responsibilities.
  - » Do you still enjoy your job?
  - » Is your job the same?
  - » What impact do the changes have on your responsibilities? Have they changed?
  - » How will change alter your ability to perform your job?
  - » Are there certain aspects of the change that you can control? If so, can they positively impact your group/department, and/or its goals?
  - » Does the change affect your level of motivation?
  - » Do you understand and agree with the success metrics? If you are not sure of the desired outcomes or the success metrics, have the confidence to ask questions in a constructive manner to clarify.
- Focus on your past successes
  - » What made you succeed?
  - » How have you adapted to prior changes?
  - » What tools helped you adapt to change in the past?
  - » Can you think of a situation where you were initially disappointed in a change but were pleasantly surprised after a period of adjustment?

You have adapted and succeeded in the past. You can and you will again. Change is inevitable and it is up to you to decide to accept, adapt and succeed.

## Adapting to Forces Beyond Our Control: Navigating Conflict in the Workplace

Workplaces often face disruptions from natural disasters to global challenges like pandemics, climate change and social upheavals. These events not only force adaptation but also create tensions and conflicts that teams must navigate to maintain resilience and collaboration.

### Pandemic Aftermath: Hybrid Work Conflicts

The hybrid work model, a cornerstone of the “new normal,” has introduced flexibility but also sparked workplace tensions. Misaligned expectations on productivity and inconsistent schedules have caused frustration. While some miss in-person collaboration, others feel disconnected from the focus, support and networking they had while working remotely. Clear policies, open communication and opportunities to reconnect, such as team retreats and group exercises, can help address these conflicts and offset some frustrations.

### Digital Transformation and Workplace Disputes

The rapid adoption of digital tools and automation has revolutionized workplaces but also caused friction. Employees may feel overwhelmed or undertrained, and inequities in access to technology can exacerbate tensions. Prioritizing inclusivity, equitable access and comprehensive training can ease these challenges.

### Social and Political Shifts: Addressing Tensions

Recent movements for equity and justice have brought necessary conversations to workplaces but can also lead to misunderstandings. Creating a culture of respectful disagreements and safe spaces for dialogue can help teams navigate these discussions constructively.

### Building Resilience Through Conflict Resolution

Conflict is a natural part of adapting to change. Open communication, empathy, and problem-solving are key to resolving tensions and strengthening teams. By fostering mutual understanding and keeping an open mind, organizations can turn conflicts into opportunities for growth, ensuring they thrive in a world of constant change.

Here are some guiding questions to help teams work through conflict during periods of transition:

1. What conflicts or challenges arose during recent disruptions, and how can we address them constructively?
2. How can we establish clear expectations and boundaries to minimize misunderstandings in hybrid or remote work environments?
3. What training or resources do we need to feel confident using recent technologies and adapting to change?
4. How can we create a safe space for discussing sensitive topics, such as social justice, political changes or workplace inequities?
5. How do we ensure that everyone’s voice is heard and valued, even during times of stress or disagreement?
6. What lessons from past conflicts can help us improve collaboration and communication moving forward?
7. What steps can we take to rebuild trust and cohesion after periods of tension or disagreement?

By raising and addressing these questions and fostering a culture of mutual understanding, organizations can turn workplace conflicts into opportunities for growth and innovation. Adapting to forces beyond our control may be inevitable, but how we handle the conflicts they bring is entirely within our power.

## Requesting Constructive Feedback

In a 2014 study conducted by the Harvard Business Review, participants stated that they preferred constructive feedback (57%) over praise (43%). This suggests that most employees want to know what they can do to improve their performance. I even go further to say managers also want and can benefit from constructive feedback from their employees, but are wary to approach them.

Since joining Bentley in 2018 as the University Ombuds, I have had some great conversations. I realized that we admire and respect our colleagues, our peers and our managers. Yet, we are unwilling to give them a gift: the gift of constructive feedback.

One of the most important aspects of giving constructive feedback is the way we present the feedback. It should be presented:

- In a sincere way
- As a gift to help the other person
- Using specific examples of situations
- At the right time
- Face-to-face in a one-on-one meeting
- After requesting and receiving permission to provide it.

Finally, we should ask the person receiving the feedback to, in turn, provide us with constructive feedback. If you are the manager who just gave the feedback, I encourage you to give permission to your employee to provide you constructive feedback too.

The beginning of the calendar year is a perfect time – but not the only time! – to seek areas of improvement. I challenge us to reach out to a colleague, an employee, a manager or anyone else to request constructive feedback. Many of us want to give such feedback and want to help. Your reaching out will give us permission to do so.



“People believe constructive criticism is essential to their career development. They want it from leaders. But their leaders often do not feel comfortable offering it up. From this we conclude that the ability to give corrective feedback constructively is one of the critical keys to leadership, an essential skill to boost your team’s performance that could set you apart.”

Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman,  
*Harvard Business Review*

## The Good, the Better and the Best Manager

For those who remember the movie, yes, I did get the idea for the title from Clint Eastwood's classic western, The Good, the Bad and the Ugly.

The message the movie conveys is that we all have the choice to do the moral and right thing or not. The decision to lean one way or the other may significantly depend on our work environment. Our managers and leaders play a key role in determining that environment.

Managers focus on accomplishing a combination of related goals with the support of a team of employees. Good managers possess many qualities such as knowledge, communication skills, respect, ability to delegate, honesty, creativity, empathy and commitment to success. But not all managers need

to have leadership skills to succeed. It depends on the organization's culture and its leaders' expectations.

Having said that, the best managers also have leadership skills. Leadership skills allow them to understand the vision of the organization and appreciate their role within it. They motivate and empower employees to contribute to the success of the entire organization's vision while accomplishing their team's goals and objectives.

The most critical skills for leaders to have include the ability to gain respect, communicate effectively, encourage collaboration, allow employees to learn from mistakes and empower them to personal and organizational excellence.



## The Value of Having and Being a Mentor

A mentor provides us with advice, feedback, new connections to help us achieve our goals and guide us to greater success. They can also be a trusted ear when faced with a challenging situation or a conflict. No matter how experienced or senior we are in an organization, a mentor should be engaged, and more than one mentor is common.

By offering guidance and perspectives, a mentor helps with our professional and personal growth. A mentor provides valuable insight into projects we are working on and ideas we want to test and implement. They can help us navigate challenging situations such as working with "difficult" individuals. A mentor's wealth of experience may open our minds to new perspectives and provide opportunities for growth and success. They are also in a position to introduce their network which helps us achieve our aspirations and goals and can invite us to meetings that we would not otherwise attend.

One of the greatest values of a mentoring relationship is the personalized attention it offers. A mentor understands us, cares for our success and can provide specific advice based on objectives. As a result, mentees have greater confidence when making decisions knowing that they have heard the insight and experience of more experienced individuals.

A good way to find a mentor is to first reflect on the main reason we may benefit from having a mentor. Some questions to ask yourself include:

- What are my goals and what would I like my mentor to provide me with to advance my career?
- What do I need to learn from a mentor and what are the questions and issues I should discuss with them?
- What are the metrics of a successful relationship for the mentee and the mentor?

An effective way to find a mentor is to identify individuals we respect. They can be individuals at a more advanced stage in their career. They can also be individuals whose leadership qualities and personalities we admire.

Once in a mentoring relationship, it is important for the mentor and mentee to regularly evaluate the progress and impact each has on the other. As mentioned, both must realize the benefits.

No matter how senior we are, a mentor remains valuable providing a fresh and innovative perspective that even senior executives may overlook. And since giving can be as rewarding as receiving, becoming a mentor has its benefits as well. By giving back and sharing one's knowledge, mentors feel wanted and appreciated. They have greater confidence when their mentees succeed and express their appreciation. Helping others grow and learn gives them greater self-esteem and greater personal satisfaction. The act of giving advice and helping others succeed is as rewarding as the benefit of receiving such mentorship.

If we do not have a mentor, I encourage us to reach out and seek one who can advise and guide us. If you are not one already, there are many opportunities to become a mentor.

If you have the time and interest, I am confident the experience of mentorship will be extremely rewarding.

**"One of the greatest values of mentors is the ability to see ahead what others cannot see and to help them navigate a course to their destination."**

John C. Maxwell

## Exercise: Improving Teamwork

As a neutral Ombuds, I am often asked to facilitate a team meeting. That usually indicates that the team may need some help in becoming more collaborative, effective, productive or motivated. It also could reflect an unresolved conflict that needs to be addressed.

My first task when meeting a team for the first time is to create a comfortable environment that allows all the members the opportunity to voice what makes a “good” and “effective” team in their eyes. Although we know what makes a good team, the challenge is how to put into practice what we already know.

For example, we know that open and honest communication within the team is critical for its success. Here are some other factors important to team success:

1. Strong leadership
2. Appreciation of and commitment to the mission of the team
3. Taking calculated risks
4. Accountability for actions taken
5. Accepting mistakes as teaching moments
6. Celebrating milestones reached
7. Trusting fellow team members

Team exercises can be conducted to highlight the importance of the above-mentioned factors for team success. One such exercise, described in this article, touches mainly on open and honest communication and includes an evaluation of oneself and the team. A follow-up action plan, described toward the end of this article, applies the exercise’s findings to help team members achieve their own and the group’s goals in a more collaborative and effective manner.

The duration of this exercise is a function of the number of team members. It is performed in two parts and can be done in person or online. The online exercise was created in response to the 2020 pandemic.

Each team member receives index cards called Feedback Cards via email that include their own name and the names of other team members. The total number of cards received should be the total number of individuals in the team.

In the first part of the exercise, each team member is asked to complete the following sentence on the card with their own name:

- » One of my biggest strengths is:
- » One area I would like to improve in is:
- » I enjoy my job because:

In the second part of the exercise, each team member is asked to complete the following statements on the card of each of the other team members:

- » As a colleague, I appreciate that you... because it helps our team... because it helps me...
- » As a colleague, I prefer you do not... or do less of... because...

If the exercise is conducted in person, cards from all team members who have completed the second part are given to the Ombuds. The team members are asked to hold on to their individual cards that they completed for the first part of the exercise.

Team members are then asked to share their responses about themselves from the first part of the exercise. Then the Ombuds anonymously reads out loud the comments reflecting the behavior appreciated by their colleagues, namely the positive feedback.

If all team members agree, the constructive feedback portion of part two may be shared anonymously and openly with everyone. The authors of both positive and constructive feedback are anonymous. No member will know who provided the specific comments on the feedback cards except the authors.

If a team member prefers, the Ombuds can hold onto that team member’s constructive feedback card until the individual requests it. The best time for an individual to receive constructive feedback is when that individual feels good about a recent accomplishment and is strong and humble enough to receive it. Even if the individual does not agree with the comments, perception could often be reality to many.

No matter how prepared or how strong one feels, constructive feedback may not be appreciated and even cause some resentment. But that is not unusual. Resentment will gradually and hopefully translate into action. I have experienced situations where those who have resented constructive feedback at first have later come around to appreciate such feedback as a valuable gift.

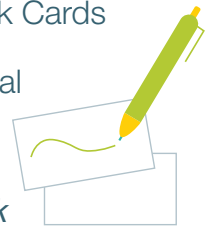
The exercise described above plays a critical step in creating a landscape for greater understanding, collaboration and trust among team members. It will motivate them to be more engaged and eager to play a role in making a stronger, more effective team.

The recommended follow-up activity described below applies the findings of the exercise and focuses on specific actions each team member can take to improve, to help each team member and to help the goals of the group. Questions to be answered in this phase include:

- What can you do to address your desire to improve in the area you mentioned?
- How can you play a role in helping other team members address their area of improvement?
- Can you consider collaborating with another team member to be more effective in addressing that team member’s desired areas of improvement?
- How will your collaboration and ideas help your team members, yourself and the overall goals of your group?
- Should we eliminate any existing goals?
- Should we include new goals for our group and mission?

## Steps for the Team Exercise

- 1 Receive Feedback Cards
- 2 Complete Personal Reflections



### Part 2: Peer Feedback

- 1 Give Feedback for Others
- 2 Submit Cards Anonymously

### Sharing Feedback

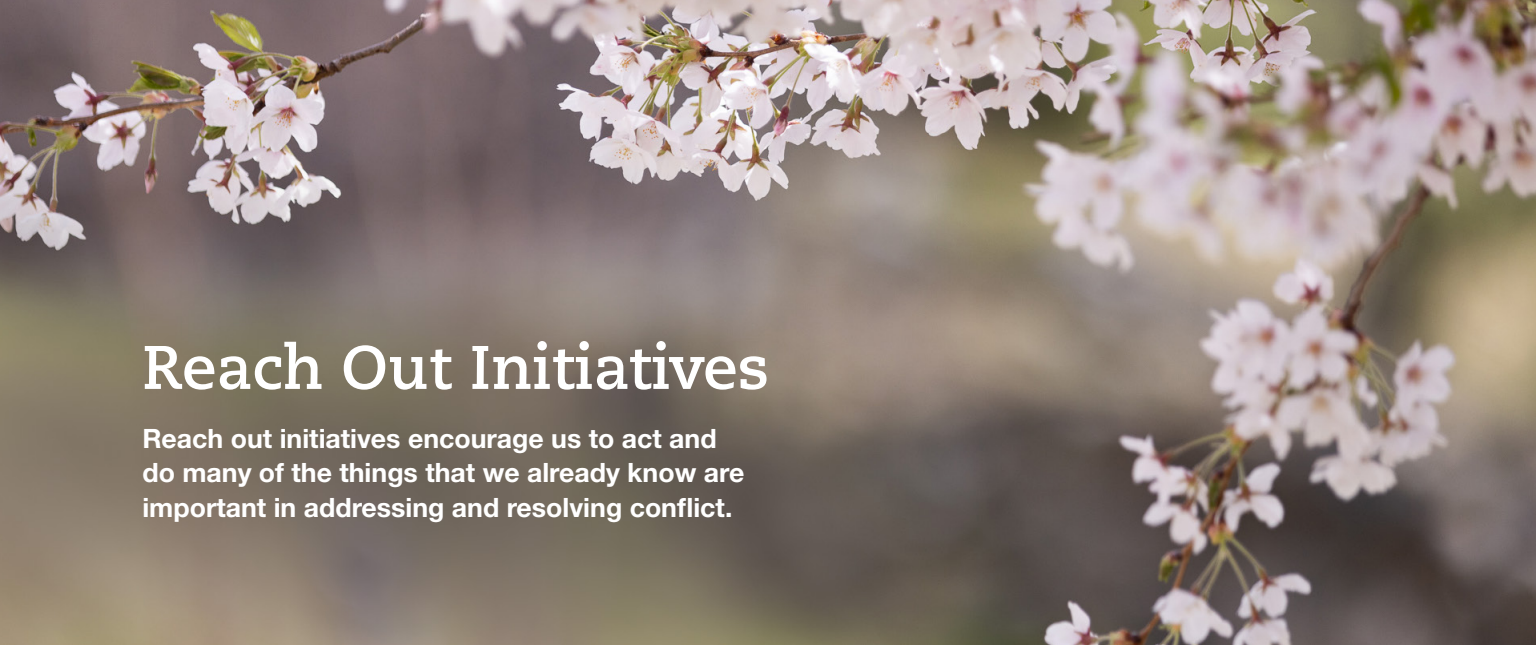
- 1 Share Personal Reflections
- 2 Hear Positive Feedback
- 3 Optional Constructive Feedback



### Follow-Up Actions

- 1 Plan Improvement
- 2 Support Each Other
- 3 Track Progress

Please remember this is a process, and it may take a few weeks or months to see meaningful results. The small steps and successes will lead to bigger successes.



# Reach Out Initiatives

Reach out initiatives encourage us to act and do many of the things that we already know are important in addressing and resolving conflict.

## Accepting Accountability

As we gain experiences—both personal and professional—we grow in many ways and develop greater confidence to address challenging situations. Even when we face difficulties, I hear many people say that they have been proud of and empowered by the ways they addressed their challenges.

Some have even agreed that conflict is not always bad. When managed in a timely and constructive manner, it can result in more open communications, collaborative commitment to an outcome, decisions and overall goals, as well as greater personal satisfaction.

One of the key factors in ensuring “good conflict” outcomes is accountability.

I define accountability in the workplace as taking responsibility for our actions. It may appear that the conflict occurred because of someone else’s behavior and that indeed may be the case. However, accountability gives us the opportunity and self-confidence to ask ourselves: Could we have contributed to the conflict?

Conflicts escalate especially when no one takes responsibility. When we hold ourselves accountable, we take responsibility for some fault, sometimes even a greater portion than we deserve. We accept constructive feedback and welcome it to achieve the desired outcome.

This Reach Out Initiative encourages us to accept accountability when warranted. How can we learn to become more accountable when faced with a conflict? We first need to evaluate what happened and focus on the facts, encouraging ourselves not to blame others but to care enough to learn and to understand from them.

We need the confidence to be honest with others but especially with ourselves. We need to recognize that we may have played a more significant role in causing the conflict than initially thought.

Because we tend to personalize a situation, it can be helpful to remove ourselves from conflict. It may allow us to better reflect on the role we have played in creating the conflict, no matter how small. We can ask ourselves: If someone else is faced with the same situation, how would I advise them to address and resolve the conflict? This can help us move forward to collaborate and achieve a resolution.

When justified, a timely and sincere apology will also help expedite the path to a resolution.

Lastly, we can use conflict resolution as a teaching moment and agree on an effective way forward, focusing on the outcome as well as on the relationship.

## Forgiveness

*Forgiveness Frees: Let Go, Heal and Empower Yourself*

Many times, colleagues reach out to the Ombuds because they are angry or in pain mostly due to a feeling of unfair treatment directed at them. They may feel resentment and when the pain is severe enough, they may even wish punishment for the perceived perpetrator. The hurt is heightened when the offender’s action is personal, unforeseen and unwarranted.

After validating the feelings of anger and disappointment and when appropriate, I ask the person to share previous experiences with the offender that were good for their relationship. To my pleasant surprise, they often share notable examples.

I also ask whether there could be a reason the offender acted in such an unwelcomed way. Focusing on a past positive may decrease, but rarely eliminate, the pain. Therefore, one of the most challenging aspects of my job is trying to lessen the pain to motivate and empower an individual to forgive.

Forgiveness is defined as a conscious decision by an individual to let go of feelings of anger toward a person who has harmed them, independent of whether the person deserves forgiveness. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting, nor condoning hurtful behavior.

I am including this Reach Within Initiative because I have often felt the pain and anger of individuals who have been hurt and felt that they have been treated unfairly. The pain can last for weeks, months and even years.

Regrettably, some individuals will neither apologize nor express regret for the pain they have caused and may even attempt to justify their actions.

The realization that people are imperfect and that we all make mistakes may help us gain the capacity to forgive. Can we recall being forgiven by others? Can such experiences teach us to be more understanding and accepting of our own and others’ imperfections?

I encourage all of us to consider letting go of the anger and forgive. Holding on to anger and hurt only does more harm to oneself. Expecting others to apologize or change their behavior makes us prisoners of the very pain caused by others. We can only control how we react to painful situations. Being able to forgive can prove to be a valuable gift to the offender but mostly to oneself, freeing us of some of the anger. This Reach Within Initiative encourages us all to gift ourselves the ability to forgive.

If you see the value in forgiving someone, I am happy to help. Also, below are a few steps you may consider taking:

- Express your anger and do not deny it.
- Speak with someone you trust who will validate your anger and show you compassion.
- Give yourself a timeline. How long do you want to stay angry? At what point will your anger be destructive to you instead of constructive?
- Write down exactly what you would want to say to the offender in a constructive manner if you had the opportunity to do so; read it aloud and envision the offender hearing it. If you decide to move forward with speaking with the offender, let that person know that the behavior was not acceptable and how it affected you. There is a chance you will be pleasantly surprised by the response. Perhaps the intention was to be helpful and not hurtful.
- Do more of the things that you enjoy whether it is taking a walk, watching a comedy, reading a book, or playing a game.



## Leading with Curiosity

*Lead with Curiosity: Ask, Listen and Build Understanding*

Curiosity is defined as the desire to know and an inner interest to inquire. In addition to playing a significant role in the resolution of a conflict, curiosity, as we all know, is an integral part of academic life.

Faculty inspires curiosity within students not just by sharing their knowledge and providing answers, but by exhibiting leadership and asking questions to empower students to expand their knowledge to produce their own answers. Successful leaders and managers do the same with colleagues and employees.

Honest misunderstandings and lack of communication often lead to conflict. Being curious encourages us to ask questions and to listen more. It creates a platform for us to question whether what we think and what we believe is real. When facing a conflict, we feel annoyed, unheard, hurt, angry and disrespected. Asking ourselves if we misinterpreted a behavior or an action by another person may be

a good first step to diffuse that anger. The desire to learn and allow ourselves to be curious takes us beyond that first step. This is critical especially when we value a relationship and seek a positive outcome to a disagreement.

Being curious by asking questions in a respectful manner during a conflict shows the other person your interest in resolving the conflict by trying to understand a different point of view. The other party will feel heard. You may not agree with what the person tells you, but being heard and respected is critical to moving the relationship forward.

This Reach Out Initiative encourages us to be more curious when facing a conflict or a challenging situation. It encourages us to ask more questions and to be an active and attentive listener. It also challenges us to practice many of our core values including learning, respect, caring and collaboration.

## Asking Why

*Challenge the Status Quo: Ask Why, Inspire Change, Drive Progress*

Questioning the status quo can create conflict. Yet, asking the question why in a constructive manner can lead to ideas that reinforce our core values and build upon our strategic Reach Out Initiatives.

Conflict can indeed be productive. Many articles in this collection provide suggestions on how we can utilize it to our advantage.

Like most large organizations, universities can benefit from change. Change can provide new and better paths to achieve our goals, strengthen our academic offerings, and offer new Reach Out Initiatives that further align with our vision. The impact of change may not show positive results in the short term, but in time it can prove its value.

We sometimes overlook opportunities to improve the way we do our work. If we are comfortable with the way things are, we may see no need to make changes.

New staff and faculty can often observe and provide a unique perspective unburdened by the inertia of the past. Those of us who have been here longer may have overlooked what newer arrivals see. But all of us should be encouraged to take the risk of questioning why things are done a certain way, especially when we see new ways to get work done in a more efficient and productive manner. Disruptive thinking, mostly defined as asking “why?” and “is there another way?” is a thought process that at times takes us outside of our comfort zone, yet is critical for the greater success of the organization.

I am sometimes approached by staff and/or faculty who have ideas that are disruptive yet potentially beneficial to Bentley. Our values allow us to feel empowered to reach out to the appropriate individuals to present ideas even if we believe that our suggestions will not be adopted. If the ideas are not welcomed at the time, a compromise may be to pilot the idea for a limited period, which is a less risky commitment.

During uncertain times, it is not easy to express our disruptive thinking. But if done in a constructive manner, we can overcome the fear of risk to our professional security.

What existing plans can be accomplished in better ways with different processes? Can the potential benefits of change outweigh the potential risks? How can we question the status quo in a constructive and collaborative manner? Below are some steps to consider:

- Be clear about what you want changed.
- Make sure you have comprehensive information on the potential benefits and risks of the change. Do your homework.
- Share your ideas with colleagues and get their thoughts.
- Have a specific implementation plan that includes success metrics.
- Present your idea to the appropriate individuals.

## Offering to Help, Asking for Help

Almost every person has a strong desire to help someone.

This Reach Out Initiative centering on help reflects a Bentley core value that most of us practice on a regular basis.

I know many of us have reached out to someone to offer help. We may have experienced many benefits in helping others.

Many of us have also reached out to ask for help. In general, and perhaps prior to the pandemic, asking for help was a sign of strength. After all the world has been through in the past several years, I might assert that asking for help is not only a sign of strength but also a sign of self-confidence. It allows us to express our desire to remain strong and to succeed.

**“The only mistake you can make is not asking for help.”**

Sandeep Jauhar, MD and author



## Addressing Micromanagement

### *Micromanagement Stifles Growth: Control Hinders; Trust Empowers*

An excellent way to motivate employees is to give them the confidence to perform at their best. One way to boost employee confidence is to allow them to address an issue or perform a task the way they want, which could be different from what a manager wants. A good leader, however, will accept the employee's approach if the desired outcome is achieved.

As Ombuds, I have had conversations with managers and staff focused on the issue of micromanagement. My sense from those conversations is that managers do not enjoy micromanaging staff any more than staff enjoy being micromanaged.

I hear mostly from staff. They tell me that they feel unmotivated and discouraged and they lose confidence in their ability to complete assigned tasks successfully. They also feel uncomfortable discussing micromanagement with their managers. They tell me that they do not believe that their manager will change their own behavior, and they do

not want to take the risk of offending them.

This Reach Out Initiative is to encourage staff who feel micromanaged to address the issue directly with their managers. If you accept the premise that most managers prefer not to micromanage, you should feel empowered to let them know how it affects you.

One constructive way to address this issue is to ask your manager if it would be possible not to provide too much detail for an assignment but instead give the desired outcome. If you need more information or context, you will ask your manager as needed. You can commit to them, and you will keep them posted of your progress. You should still let your manager know how much you appreciate their desire to have you succeed, but that you would be more motivated and productive if you were given more flexibility on how to complete the assigned task. You can add that it would help with your confidence and professional development.

## Managing a Stressful Day

### *Stress Happens: Stay Focused, Offer Support, Keep Moving Forward*

Most, if not all of us, have experienced some level of pressure in our jobs during our careers.

We have witnessed colleagues and managers under stress meeting a deadline, completing a project, or addressing an unexpected challenge at work.

Some of us can deal with the pressure better than others. Because such pressure can affect their behavior and leadership style, managers tend to be more sensitive. Their reaction to pressure may negatively impact morale and the productivity of many members of their teams.

No matter how well we manage the pressure, it is unavoidable that colleagues and managers will sense it especially if there exists a long-standing working relationship.

In case you feel a colleague or manager is stressed, please consider the suggestions below.

If from a colleague, especially one who is usually positive but is disseminating negativity, consider approaching that person to offer support. Often, the person is not aware of the impact they are having on colleagues. Also, listening to the person expressing concern and validating that concern can be highly effective in helping address the challenge and helping the person be more positive again. Asking the person if you can be of help or asking if you can make suggestions may also be highly effective.

If it is a manager who is in a bad mood, more people can be affected, including you. The first thing to

remember is that managers face several challenges you may not be aware of, and of which you may not want to be made aware. Their main concerns as managers may be different than your main concerns. It is important to realize that their concerns or mood may have nothing to do with you or anyone else on the team.

It can be difficult to ignore the mood, but do your best to focus on your own work and your own goals and deadlines.

If you know that the challenge your manager is facing relates to a project in which you are involved, make sure you let the manager know you are doing everything you can to make the project a success.

You can share with the manager your plan of action to correct the problem.

You could also ask the manager for advice and request support in the plan of action you propose.

If the challenge has nothing to do with you but you sense some "pressure" or "negativity" you can ask your manager if there is anything you can do to help. This will also make the manager realize the impact they have on the team.

This Reach out initiative encourages us not to take it personally when a colleague or manager is having an off day, to offer help if appropriate and to focus on doing our own job as well as we can.

## The Value of Being Humble

### *Humility Inspires Growth, Trust, Empathy and Collaboration*

**Call to Action:** Learn the power of humility—listen, collaborate and turn conflicts into opportunities for connection.

To be humble is a great attribute to have. It can play a key role in addressing and resolving a conflict.

Demonstrating humility also touches on many of our core values including learning, respect, caring, collaboration and impact.

The simple definition of a humble person is one who is not arrogant, but modest.

Humble people underestimate their own importance and value others' contributions and strengths as much as or more than their own.

Humble people do not let their egos get in the way. They often view change as an opportunity to gain experience.

Humble people tend to collaborate more, have open minds, learn from others and admit their mistakes as valuable teaching moments.

Humble people can have a profound impact on others. They build trust. They criticize constructively with the intention of caring and helping others.

Humble people display a quiet confidence and are secure enough not to tout their accomplishments and importance. They focus more on learning from others and empowering others to succeed.

As the Ombuds, I see humility as:

- Realizing we are not always right, and we all can make mistakes.
- Knowing how to apologize and to be sincere.
- Being eager to collaborate to resolve a conflict and to work for the benefit of others more than just for themselves.
- Seeing a conflict or a challenging situation as a teaching moment.
- Listening actively and asking questions to better understand the other person's views.
- Keeping an open mind and avoiding making unwarranted assumptions.

I encourage us all to be humble, especially when faced with a potential conflict.

## Taking Risks

*Step Out, Speak Up: Take Risks, Resolve Conflicts, Embrace Growth*

As Bentley's Ombuds, I often meet with individuals who do not feel comfortable taking the risk of addressing a conflict. They seek guidance as they realize the need to address the conflict. I try to instill the confidence in them to address the conflict themselves or at least become less uncomfortable when doing so.

Others are hesitant to address the conflict for several reasons. They feel they might offend their manager or a colleague, which they believe is a risk too great to take. They appreciate their position and do not want to "rock the boat." They decided that speaking about the issue confidentially with the Ombuds will be sufficient for now. But this last step alone rarely suffices since the conflict with the other person remains unresolved and often grows as an internal conflict.

Those who address the conflict head on are often pleasantly surprised by the outcome and express appreciation for being encouraged to act outside their comfort zone, or in other words taking the risk of stepping out of their comfort zone.

Addressing the conflict can have additional benefits as we answer the following questions:

- Does addressing conflict help other colleagues?
- Does it help the group's mission?
- Does it help achieve one's goals more effectively?
- Does it help improve morale?
- Does it offer new opportunities?
- Does it have a negative impact in the short run, but can it be beneficial in the longer term?
- Does it do anything to promote our core values?

Taking a risk or stepping out of one's comfort zone will very often help us more than hurt us. How?

It gives us self-confidence by resolving conflicts on our own. Even if the exercise does not end with the desired outcome, at least we have the self-assurance of having tried. But again, we may be pleasantly surprised with the outcome. Even with an unsatisfactory outcome, we may be able to learn from the experience and become more willing to take another calculated risk next time.

Having spent many years in research and development, I have learned that researchers who have never failed are not experienced researchers. Those who have disrupted the status quo for the better took significant risks and often failed before succeeding. We can all benefit from taking calculated risks. We can benefit from failure as a growth opportunity which highlights the old saying, "no risk, no reward."

This Reach Out Initiative encourages us to step out of our comfort zone to try and address a challenge or a conflict facing us. Ask yourself, what makes it a conflict? Is it because we see a better way to solve a problem or a more effective and fair process to achieve a goal? Is it because we want to contribute more to our group's success and Bentley? Is it because it is the right thing to do?

There will always be a certain level of conflict in any growing and changing organization. Taking the initiative to address a conflict in a timely manner or address an issue often yields many of the benefits mentioned above.

## Community Service

*Share Your Passions, Build Empathy, Resolve Conflicts*

**Call to Action:** Learn to connect through nonprofit work—foster understanding, inspire collaboration and make a meaningful impact.

What does volunteering for or joining a nonprofit board have to do with Bentley University?

Furthermore, what is the relationship between affiliating oneself with a nonprofit and our ability to address conflict in a constructive way?

Volunteering for a cause we are passionate about, whether it relates to hunger, health, religion, animals, the environment, art, the elderly, the disadvantaged, or many other great causes, demonstrates many of Bentley's core values, impact care, collaboration and compassion.



We know that volunteering stimulates empathy in us and makes us feel good about helping others. It also improves our sense of well-being, increases our self-confidence, reduces stress and facilitates new and meaningful connections.

With respect to the second question, a reinforced sense of empathy, well-being and self-confidence better equips us to handle conflict in a constructive manner. It will enable us to stand in the shoes of others to better understand the cause of conflict and how to best resolve it.

While some of us want to volunteer and be affiliated with certain causes, we may not know how to go about connecting with the appropriate nonprofits. Learning of the organizations and causes that interest our colleagues may help inspire and enable our involvement.

This Reach Out Initiative encourages all of us to share our nonprofit and charitable interests with our teams. Our passion and our involvement with nonprofits may resonate with the passions of those we feel we may have a conflict with or those we would like to better understand. Sharing a passion may be a first step in finding common ground.

**“One of the best reasons to volunteer for a nonprofit is its effect on your mental well-being. Studies show that people who volunteer report feeling happier and less anxious than their peers.”**

Blog post, Wendy Stebbins | [handsonmaui.com](http://handsonmaui.com)

## Sharing Your Outside Interests

**Call to Action:** Learn to share your passions and discover common ground with your colleagues.

It has been my experience that we may be more willing to address a conflict or may be more open to expressing our concern with someone who shares a similar interest.

Sharing your outside interests with colleagues aligns with the belief that knowing something more about them will help us understand them better. This may result in greater trust, collaboration, productivity and satisfaction.

“For the longest time, I was annoyed at a colleague who always expressed the need to quantify all success metrics, something that I used to see as delaying progress with our projects. I am now glad that I learned of his passion to teach children math. It made me less impatient with him and more accepting of his desire to quantify everything!”

Anonymous former colleague

## Expressing Appreciation

*Gratitude Sparks Joy, Motivation, and Stronger Connections*

**Call to Action:** Learn to express appreciation — empower others, build relationships and boost positivity!

Many individuals appreciate a compliment on a job well done or on any action that resulted in helping someone. They feel appreciated and are motivated and empowered to do “more” the next time. The person expressing appreciation benefits just as much, possibly more.

Many of us want to give such compliments and express appreciation but somehow, we get sidetracked with our busy schedule and many times forget to do so.

“In positive psychology research, gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness. Gratitude helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity and build strong relationships.”

*Giving Thanks Can Make You Happier,*  
Harvard Health Publishing



## About the Author



Eliane S. Markoff brings to Bentley University experience from both business and the academic worlds. She spent 20 years working for a Fortune 500 high tech company managing work forces in the U.S. and Europe. She held positions in Engineering, Research and Development and Marketing.

Markoff lent her considerable listening and mediation skills as an unofficial ombudsperson to build bridges among corporate divisions and individuals who needed to collaborate to be successful. With a high emotional IQ, she brought creative solutions to workplace conflicts. She has mediated shareholder disputes within close corporations and conflicts among family members over will and estate contests.

Markoff was an adjunct professor at Bentley University teaching Organizational Behavior and Team Management to undergraduate and graduate students. Prior to rejoining Bentley as Ombuds in 2018, she launched the Ombuds Office at Wheelock College after serving on its board of trustees for six years.

She is one of the 125 women to appear in *Inspirational Women of Boston* by the Boston Globe's Bill Brett. She is one of the Wellesley residents honored in 2012 by the Wellesley Free Library Foundation as an individual who has had an impact within and beyond the Wellesley community. Markoff was also honored in 2011 with the Giving Back Award by Women Entrepreneurs in Science and Technology (WEST). She is co-founder of The Rachel Molly Markoff Foundation dba Art in Giving, a gallery that raises funds for pediatric cancer research by promoting the fine arts. In 2024, Marquis Who's Who honored Markoff for excellence in conflict resolution and philanthropy.

Markoff received her mediation training from Cambridge Dispute Resolution and the Boston Law Collaborative. She is fluent in French and Arabic and earned her MBA from Boston College and her BA in Economics from the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

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