



## **Resolving Issues with Your Boss (Part 3):** *Gaining time to rebuild trust.*

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### **Summary of Part 2**

Part 2 of this series defined the five levels of trust. It discussed the high price that is exacted when trust is perceived to be broken in the workplace and began the conversation of how difficult and lengthy it is to regain it. Part 3 expands on the idea that regaining trust requires effort.

### **Cognitive Dissonance and Attitude**

We have briefly discussed how conflict and the loss of trust cause emotional stress: Cognitive Dissonance.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, L. 1962) presents a simple idea: when a person holds two conflicting beliefs or ideas, they experience psychological discomfort, known as dissonance. This unpleasant state motivates individuals to reduce tension by changing one or both conflicting beliefs or rationalizing the inconsistency. Dissonance is not about eliminating discomfort in the same way basic needs like hunger are met; rather, it is about resolving conflicts between beliefs or actions to relieve our internal discomfort, i.e., changing beliefs, justifying actions, or seeking new supportive information. Individuals can either modify their beliefs to make them more consistent or rationalize their behavior to maintain consistency.

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A few key points should be kept in mind when discussing cognitive dissonance: 1) Over time, individuals develop a large number of expectations about what things go together and what things do not; when such an expectation is not fulfilled, dissonance occurs. 2) Different individuals have different tolerances for cognitive dissonance; some are more prone to experiencing and resolving it. 3) Strong external justifications can reduce the need to change beliefs or attitudes, and 4) Cultural values influence responses to cognitive dissonance.

Our attitudes, then, are our personal, present-state collection of expectations. They form the basis of our starting default emotional state for responding to dissonance.

### **To Be, or Not to Be**

Over the past 40 years, the legal profession has played a significant role in dispute resolution. Many formal approaches to resolving disputes involve the intervention of a third party, reflecting the belief that individuals may struggle to resolve conflicts effectively on their own. However, not all third-party interventions are considered "the practice of law" or formal legal processes; some are informal and non-binding.

In employment matters, seeking professional legal assistance or intervention from human resources is often necessary and unavoidable. While many individuals prefer to resolve disputes without third-party involvement when possible, there are situations where such assistance is beneficial or essential.

That aside, many instances of cognitive dissonance occur in the workplace. Because of this, our natural inclination to remove ourselves from the source of the dissonance is limited by our reliance on employment for personal survival and self-identification. We feel constrained in our ability to take direct action. Many individuals may accept uncomfortable or disappointing situations without expressing their dissatisfaction openly. Many curb their emotions, and that unchecked often leads to an outburst or an unexpected reaction. Many focus on "winning" or achieving their goals in a way that may not align with effective problem-solving or constructive outcomes.

Many individuals may react without a clear understanding of the tactical tools available or the strategies needed to implement them effectively. They are unprepared to interpret what they are feeling, why they are feeling, and what to do about it in ways that support their personal well-being or professional growth.

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### **Fight, Flight, Freeze, or Appraisal**

Admitting our mistakes is a universal challenge, especially in the workplace, where expectations for competence and professionalism are high. We are all hired to produce a product or service for someone else. Either directly or indirectly, they are paying us for an expected outcome.

For whatever reason, someone who does not conform to these outcome expectations is seen as having less value than someone who either conforms or exceeds those expectations. We all understand that when someone questions the quantity, quality, or timeliness of an expected outcome, in its most basic sense, they are essentially accusing us of theft, bad faith, or both.

For most of us, based on our prevailing circumstances and in-the-moment attitude, our predisposition to trigger a fight, flight or freeze response is about to kick in if we let it happen.

While this is outside the scope of this article, it is highly recommended that the Technology, Entertainment, Design (TED) Conference video of Psychologist Lisa Feldman Barret's (Jan 2018) presentation be viewed. It is enlightening and thought-provoking. Similarly, it is highly recommended that everyone pursue training in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) tools, and continue practicing its tools daily.

Emotional regulation is a critical precursor to effective workplace dispute resolution. Emotions, such as frustration, anger, or stress, can escalate conflicts and hinder clear communication. By managing emotions, individuals can approach disputes calmly and constructively, improving the likelihood of resolution. Key skills in emotional regulation include mindfulness, which allows individuals to stay present and avoid impulsive reactions; self-awareness, which helps identify emotional triggers; and emotion regulation strategies, such as re-framing negative thoughts or using relaxation techniques. These tools allow individuals to stay focused on the issue at hand rather than becoming consumed by emotional reactivity.

Additionally, developing interpersonal effectiveness through communication skills like active listening, assertiveness, and empathy can support conflict resolution. These skills allow parties to express their concerns clearly, without escalating the situation, and also help in understanding and validating the other person's perspective.

By practicing emotional regulation before and during disputes, individuals and teams can approach conflicts with greater patience, empathy, and clarity. This leads to more constructive solutions and healthier workplace relationships, fostering a collaborative environment rather than one of continued tension or resentment.

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Particularly in the workplace, where we earn our living, we should begin practicing the principles of DBT: Mindfulness, Distress Tolerance, Emotion Regulation, and Interpersonal Effectiveness. DBT principles have been successfully applied to workplace conflicts and may be part of your employer's Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The internet contains many references to DBT and several interesting and helpful videos on YouTube. It is recommended that you independently research the professional background of each presenter.

To quote a few sections of Lisa Feldman Barret's (Jan 2018) TED presentation:

*"Now, I am not suggesting to you that you can just perform a couple of Jedi mind tricks and then talk yourself out of being depressed...But I am telling you that you have more control over your emotions than you might imagine. And that you have the capacity to turn down the dial on emotional suffering and its consequences for your life by learning how to construct your experiences differently. And all of us can do this. And with a little practice, we can get really good at it. Like driving, at first, it takes a lot of effort. But eventually, it becomes pretty automatic...But I also have to warn you that it does come with some fine print. Because more control also means more responsibility. If you are not at the mercy of mythical emotion circuits which are buried deep inside your brain somewhere, and which trigger automatically, then who's responsible, who's responsible when you behave badly? You are".*

This concept is crucial for conflict resolution. When we manage our emotions, we can think clearly and strategically rather than react impulsively. In emotionally charged situations, it is easy to be swept away by our feelings, leading to hasty decisions. However, by learning to manage our emotions, we can assess situations logically and create effective strategies.

Moreover, with greater emotional control comes greater responsibility. Emotional regulation means taking accountability for our actions and making blaming emotions or external factors unacceptable when we behave poorly. Ultimately, emotional control helps us navigate conflicts effectively and engage with others more intentionally.

### **Thinking Strategically, not Tactically**

In several instances, I have differentiated tactics and strategies as it concerns resolving conflict.

The metaphor of "seeing the whole board" provides a valuable way to understand the role of emotional control in conflict resolution. Just like in a game of chess, where success depends on understanding the entire game rather than focusing on just one move, managing our emotions

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allows us to step back and view the situation in its entirety. When we are not overwhelmed by emotional impulses, we gain the clarity and space needed to assess the issues from all angles, avoiding the clouding effect of immediate emotional reactions.

Emotions like anger, frustration, or fear can distort our perception in conflict situations, narrowing our focus to only the most immediate or emotionally charged aspects of the issue. This can lead to rash decisions or an escalation of the situation. However, we can "see the whole board by regulating our emotions. This allows us to evaluate the underlying causes of the conflict, consider the potential consequences of different actions, and weigh the emotional, relational, and professional costs of any given resolution.

Having this broader perspective helps us avoid reactive decisions and focus on sustainable, thoughtful strategies. When our emotions are under control, we have the mental bandwidth to assess long-term outcomes, choose the most appropriate resolution strategies, and avoid short-sighted, emotionally-driven responses. Just like in chess, this strategic approach increases our chances of achieving a favorable outcome, fostering better relationships and more effective solutions.

## **Conclusion**

Dispute resolution is fundamentally a conscious choice. It requires individuals to actively manage their emotions and approach conflicts with intention. Rather than reacting impulsively to emotional triggers, they must be aware of what they are feeling and choose to regulate their emotions. This allows them to think clearly and strategically and to behave with more confidence in difficult circumstances. In the workplace, this approach not only fosters better outcomes but also helps to preserve professional and work-related relationships and maintain a positive work environment.

Ultimately, dispute resolution involves consciously acting with clarity and responsibility. Individuals can enhance their emotional regulation and conflict resolution skills by adopting tools like those found in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). When individuals actively choose to resolve disputes with intention, they address the immediate issues and contribute to creating a more collaborative and supportive workplace culture. In this way, resolving conflict becomes a proactive, rather than reactive, process.

Most importantly, it gains the necessary time to resolve the issue and possibly the opportunity to rebuild the trust that we have lost.

\* Note: A pdf copy of this article can be found at:

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