
INTRODUCTION



“Gabe Karp, you look like shit,” Steve grinned as he swept into the waiting area. His bold remark caught me off guard. To be fair, I was coming off of an exhausting red eye flight.

“Nice to meet you, too.” I shook his hand.

I was here to observe Steve’s company—let’s call it Vulcan Solutions—because it had the fastest rate of growth *and* the highest level of conflict out of any company in my dataset. On the surface, their business model was boring (they manufacture recyclable synthetic rubber for medical devices). But under that conservative facade, this company was buzzing with confrontation during every meeting and, somehow, this confrontational culture was working well for them. I wanted to get to the bottom of what they were doing, so I asked their CEO, Steve, to let me shadow him for a day. What I saw during that visit completely contradicts how most people think conflict works.

While most of us generally fear and avoid conflict, it’s a powerful asset for those who understand it. In fact, healthy conflict has been the greatest factor driving my success as a lawyer, entrepreneur, and venture capitalist. I wrote this book to help others benefit from conflict in the same way.

Of course, not *all* conflict is productive. There is healthy conflict, and there is toxic conflict.

While healthy conflict propels people and organizations forward, toxic conflict slows us down and causes pain. It consumes an organization's energy, taxing its ability to compete, grow, and prosper. When conflict turns toxic, team engagements are painful, client relationships are strained, and individual careers suffer. The same painful dynamics play out in our personal lives as well. Toxic conflict deprives us of the love, friendships, and relationships that we seek and need.

Toxic conflict, however, is far from inevitable. Just as we might go on a dietary cleanse to rid our bodies of toxins, we can do the same to detox our organizations and our minds—and when we do, the results are phenomenal. Once we cleanse the toxins, we suddenly feel energized to embrace conflict and leverage it to drive new innovation. We navigate difficult situations with ease and elevate our relationships to a higher plane. Detoxing our companies and our minds makes us better, stronger, faster, and more connected.

The path that led me to this perspective began when I was a trial lawyer investigating the sources of conflict in my cases. I had a front row seat to the conflicts of others, and I observed how certain communication styles always seemed to either improve or worsen a situation. In those days, a big part of my job was to control the level of conflict. During tense negotiations, I defused the conflict to help everyone relax and trust one another. During contentious cross-examinations, on the other hand, I amped up the tension when I wanted to rattle a witness or make a dramatic point to the jury.

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While I served my clients well and achieved great results, I also suffered painful losses and struggled in difficult interactions with others for reasons I did not understand. Over time, I noticed the same patterns of conflict I'd seen in my cases play out in my personal life too. I was identifying the toxins that build up in human interactions and make them unhealthy. When my clients and I were able to detox those interactions, we were successful in resolving the conflicts. But when the toxins were left unchecked, we were generally in for an expensive and painful experience.

When I joined a small startup called ePrize and saw these same toxic patterns play out in the business world, I knew I was onto something important. Building a company from the ground up requires a lot of conflict. But I noticed that when we detoxed those conflicts, they really propelled our business forward. When we engaged in non-toxic confrontations with employees, clients, and shareholders, we achieved far superior results than when we avoided difficult issues or allowed toxins to infect interactions. This approach helped us grow our company into the world leader in the digital promotions industry. We acquired several smaller companies along the way and ultimately negotiated the sale of ePrize.

After our successful acquisition I entered the world of venture capital, where I've continued to experience the role of conflict on a broader scale. I have led the investments in and served on the board of directors of over a dozen companies, and I continue to witness the effects of both healthy and toxic conflict. I have negotiated business and financing deals in the hundreds of millions of dollars, and I've worked with CEOs

to resolve conflicts ranging from clients wanting to cancel multi-million-dollar contracts to underperforming team members requesting pay raises, and everything in between. Regardless of how big or small the conflict, the same patterns play out over and over.

I've also seen the role that toxic conflict plays in the personal lives of the people I've worked with and those close to me. Sadly, I know people who no longer speak to each other because of political arguments on social media. Friends have confided in me about strained relationships with their parents, disputes with their neighbors, and challenges with their kids. The same patterns of conflict I saw in the business world apply in all walks of life (my own included).

Whether you're in the courtroom, the boardroom, the breakroom, a bar, the high school cafeteria, a parent-teacher conference, your holiday dinner table, or anywhere else humans interact, conflicts follow the same patterns. We all want to be better at managing conflict, but many of us never learned how. There's no class in school for it. Think about it: we spend months in elementary school learning long division, which we never use. Yet we spend zero time learning conflict management, something we all could use virtually every day.

The good news is that I've discovered a systematic way to detox conflict. It's a process I've developed through years of practical experience and academic research into how we can harness conflict to lead happier and more productive lives. Once I started to apply what I'd learned, I noticed immediate and dramatic improvements in my ability to successfully navigate conflict.

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I realized I was onto something with these strategies a few years back when I was asked to speak to a group of CEOs about how to handle conflict. The speech was all right, but not my greatest. In the weeks and months that followed, though, I was approached by several of the CEOs and they all mentioned one of the ideas I had shared, especially one in particular: something called *Don't Get Mad at Penguins Because They Can't Fly*. I also received a strong positive reaction for a tactic I call the *Shopping List Voice* (which you'll read about later).

As I shared these tactics with others, many reported similarly positive results. So I researched and developed more strategies as well, teaching them to others and getting feedback. I've given presentations on conflict to companies, trade organizations, entrepreneur groups, lawyers, and universities, and I have received enough feedback on my approaches to know they are reliable and repeatable. These are skills anyone can learn and apply.

While some of us may fear conflict and others may love a good fight, we all have the ability to manage conflict to drive better outcomes for our companies, clients, and loved ones. The pages ahead will take you deep into the causes of conflict and provide you with tools to detox and leverage it for success and happiness.

A lack of understanding of how conflict works can explain why some companies rise and others fall—and why some careers are spectacular while others are tragic let-downs. By understanding the nature of conflict and how it can become toxic, we can rise above these challenges.

The real magic happens in organizations where conflict is not only accepted, but encouraged and required. These companies, families, and groups operate with candor and accountability. They execute at awe-inspiring speeds and blow past those who shy away from difficult issues. People within these special organizations communicate openly and clearly. They engage in free expression of ideas. Anyone with something to say has the opportunity to say it. Mistakes are uncovered quickly and performance issues are addressed without drama. People advance in their careers and grow in their personal lives in ways not possible when conflict is viewed as a negative.

Once you experience the benefits of non-toxic conflict, you will start to lean into it. You will invite it into your professional and personal life, and you'll use it to deepen your relationships and push your performance to the next level.

This book fills in the gaps left by the school system. It breaks down the factors that escalate conflict to dangerous heights and shows you how to defuse them and make conflict work *for* you, rather than *against* you. It will increase your empathy toward others, teach you to identify conflict traps before you fall into them, and help you view conflict as a productive driver of success. You'll learn simple but highly effective tools to embrace conflict so that it can fuel progress and help you communicate more effectively in all areas of life.

Along the way, you'll see the fight that ended Quentin Tarantino and Uma Thurman's friendship; the swear words that were accidentally printed on thousands of Pampers diapers packages; the toxic culture at General Motors that cost the company over \$2 billion and killed 124 people; and the

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inner workings of Seal Team 6, the elite crew that took out Osama bin Laden. You'll also meet the Buddhist monk who saved thousands from child prostitution because he was willing to treat the leaders of a Beijing crime syndicate like human beings; the executive who sues people for sport; the judge who made me feel good even as he ruled against me; and the woman who ended a years-long cycle of personal conflict with her ex-husband once she learned to stop getting mad at penguins. I've changed some names and settings to protect identities, but the substance and lessons of these stories remain intact.

Before we can get to all of that, however, I have to tell you what happened at Vulcan Solutions when I went to shadow Steve for the day and observe his completely unorthodox style of conflict management....