CONFLICT PREVENTION FOR COLLABORATORS

TEN CONVERSATIONS TO HAVE BEFORE YOU WORK TOGETHER

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Introduction

As a mediator, I help people and organizations resolve and prevent disputes, improve communication, and work more productively together. I work with a wide range of organizations and teams, including start-up companies, family-owned businesses, neighbors and creative collaborators.

I help people talk about difficult issues, often after small concerns have morphed into major problems.

The good news is, you don't need to wait for a major conflict before talking about how to resolve a problem. By anticipating common challenges that arise when people work together and planning how to tackle them, you can better prepare your partnership, project, or organization to overcome conflict when it happens.

To help you do that, I've outlined 10 conversations you should have with your business partners or team members before embarking on a business or project together. Having these conversations early – and revisiting them regularly – will prevent a lot of the problems you might otherwise need someone like me to solve.

In this workbook, you'll find:

- The ten subjects to discuss with business partners or team members before you start working together;
- Discussion guidance for each subject;
- Worksheet pages with questions to get the conversations started, and space to write down your answers; and
- Suggestions for taking action on what you learn in your conversation.

Whether you use this workbook as a group of two or twenty, it is my hope that these conversations will help you move forward together as a strong team, ready to face whatever challenges come your way.

Discussion Topics at a Glance

GOALS: Where does each of you want your collaboration to go?

ROLES: What do you want to do, and what's the plan for making that a reality?

STRENGTHS & WEAKNESSES: What are you best and worst at?

WORK STYLE: What do you need in order to do your best work?

RISK TOLERANCE: Where do you fall on the risk scale, and how can you balance each other so you make the best possible decisions?

THIRD PARTIES: Will others be involved in your collaboration, either right away or down the road?

MONEY: How do you manage (and feel about) money?

CONFLICT: Do you have compatible conflict styles, and if not, how can you adjust so problem solving is easier?

SUCCESS AND FAILURE: How will you know when you've reached your goals or need to cut your losses?

RELATIONSHIPS: What kind of relationships do you want to have, during and after this collaboration?

Conversation 1: Goals

WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS?

This might seem like an easy question, but people who are working together often assume they have a common goal without actually discussing it.

For example, two business partners might think their invention is a great idea, but one dreams of getting a patent and selling it to the highest bidder as fast as possible, while the other imagines the partnership lasting for the next thirty years. These are not necessarily incompatible goals –the partners could decide to sell the first invention in order to fund their ongoing work together – but if it's not talked about upfront, they'll be pulling the project in different directions and setting themselves up for conflict later.

Goals can also differ in more subtle ways. One person might prioritize financial rewards, for example, while another is motivated to make a difference or build a reputation. These differences could lead to conflict, but they could also lead to success if discussed and handled appropriately.

In your goals conversation, you'll talk about short term goals, long term goals, and how you'll know when you're on the right track. You'll also discuss priorities: What is most important to each of you, and why?

Begin in general terms. Once you have a few common goals worked out, get specific in order to test your ideas *and* your ability to collaborate. Your goals will evolve as you discuss and write down the steps it will take to reach them. The exercise will also reveal the areas in which you work well as a team, and where you need to make adjustments.

Tip: Before you start talking about your goals, it can be helpful for everyone to write down some ideas. That way, one person's inspiring vision doesn't take over the conversation. Don't worry if you aren't on the same page at first – you can find surprising opportunities in your differences. If you have different goals, explore ways to approach your project so everyone can work toward what matters to them. If there isn't a solution, trust that you were better off learning that at the start of the project rather than after you invested a lot of time, money and effort.

Goals Discussion Guide:

If you need a little prompting to get your goals conversation started, here are some talking points to explore:

Your reasons for pursuing this project.

- One person can have many reasons, so don't feel limited to just one! Discussing each person's passion for the project can be inspiring for everyone, so the more ideas you generate here, the better.

- Once you know what is important to each of you about the project, you'll have a better idea of each person's priorities, as well as where they will be happiest putting their energy.

Your personal hopes for the project. How do you hope to change and grow as a result of what you're working on together?

- Depending on the personalities involved in the conversation, you might want to discuss personal hopes first, or discuss them after addressing professional and big-picture hopes (see below).

Your professional hopes for the project. What tangible benefits do you want to get from what you're working on?

- These can be financial benefits, and also benefits to your career and reputation.

Your big-picture hopes for the project. What kind of bigger impact do you hope to have?

- Don't feel like you have to be realistic here – think big! It is OK to admit that you hope to change the world, even if that is very unlikely.

- And if you aren't hoping for a bigger impact, talk about that, too!

Where you see the project at different points in the future. You can use any timeline that feels appropriate.

- It can be helpful to start with your best-case scenario, but also discuss what things might look like, and how you might adjust, if everything doesn't go your way.

Goals worksheet

Before your conversation, get your mind working by quickly writing the answers to some basic goal-related questions:

What drew you to this project, and what makes you excited to be working on it?

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What are three things you hope to achieve with this collaboration?

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Where do you want this project to be in six months? One year? Five years?

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Do you have a long-term or big picture goal for this project, and if so, what is it?

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What are three things that could happen that would make you feel like you are succeeding in this project?

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Now what?

At this point, you've discussed your goals and you probably have a good idea of where everyone wants to go and what each of you cares most about. But how can you use this information?

1. Make a list of short- and long-term goals that incorporates as much of what your group cares about as possible. You might not be able to put everything on the list, and that's ok. But keep a backup list with the things the group identified that don't make the first cut, and promise to revisit that list at your next planning session so that no one feels like their priorities aren't important.

2. Make a specific plan for achieving each goal. The more you can break a goal down, the more likely you are to actually take the steps needed to reach it. Pay attention to how your group works together as you break your goals down, because this will give you insight into how you'll work together as you continue the project. It will also help with the rest of these discussion topics.

3. Assign tasks based on the priorities and passions identified in your discussion. Make sure everyone is responsible for at least one thing they really care about. Be prepared to adjust this as you go through the other discussion topics.

4. Discuss your goals with a business coach or mentor. If any of your goals are financial, discuss with your accountant. And definitely keep your lawyer up to date on your plans, since there may be legal documents or considerations associated with some of your goals.

5. Schedule a Goals Check in! Your goals and priorities will evolve and change. Plan to talk about goals again after a specific period of time.

Conversation Two: Ideal Roles

WHAT IS EACH TEAM MEMBER'S IDEAL ROLE, AND WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO ENSURE EACH PERSON IS DOING WHAT THEY WANT TO DO?

At the start of a business or project, everyone wears a lot of hats. This can create an environment of energy and teamwork, but it can also lead to resentment and wasted time. The roles conversation is an opportunity to look carefully at what needs to be done right now and who is in the best position to take responsibility for different aspects of the project. By discussing what each person wants to be doing long term, you'll help your team maintain a positive attitude as they get through the necessary short-term tasks.

Start this conversation with the fun stuff. If you had unlimited resources and no one had to do anything they didn't want to do, what would everyone's ideal role be? No need to be realistic here.

Once you know what everyone *wants* to do, discuss ways to balance this with what needs to be done so no one is doing too much or too little. If one person takes on more than they feel is their share, or gets stuck with too many tasks they really hate, they won't be a happy team member. This kind of imbalance is easy to fall into. Many groups have an enthusiastic member who takes on too much, or a slightly insecure member reluctant to volunteer for anything out of their comfort zone.

Every project involves some work that no one wants to do, or no one feels qualified to do. Talking about this work ahead of time will allow you to assign it more fairly so it doesn't keep getting bumped to the end of someone's list.

Think of those ideal roles as resources, because they point you toward the talent, interest, and passion of your team   Even if a member of your group can't focus on their preferred tasks right away because more urgent things need their attention, look for ways to use their energy and interest to make your project better.

Tip: It can be helpful to have everyone write their own "job description" without regard to what actually needs to get done, and then look at the leftover tasks so you can assign them wisely and make plans, where appropriate, for taking them off people's plates eventually.

Roles Discussion Guide:

If you need a little prompting to get your goals conversation started, here are some things you can explore:

The work you have enjoyed doing in other professional roles and in your free time. Are there certain tasks that feel easy, satisfying, or even fun for you?
- Go beyond your project and talk about everything you enjoy and feel competent at. You might be surprised to find that something is more useful or related to your project than you thought it was.
- Remember that it is just as important to be fair in assigning the tasks everyone wants as it is to be fair in assigning the ones no one wants.

The work you have not enjoyed doing in other professional roles and in your free time. What feels like a chore to you?
- Honesty is key here. Even if the thing that feels like a chore to you is something you will definitely have to do at least at the start of this project, admit that you hate it. This will allow the group to balance your tasks with others that you enjoy. And it will open a conversation about getting this task off your plate at some point in the future.
- Don't worry if there are tasks everyone hates that need to get done. The point of this conversation is just to get preferences out in the open. Remember that your long-term plan can be to outsource roles no one wants to keep.

Things you are interested in learning (or are willing to learn), both directly relevant to your project and unrelated to it.
- This is an area with a lot of potential! If, for example, the person in your group who is best at something hates doing it, but someone else is willing to learn how to do it, they could take on the role together with the goal of transitioning the task to the person that enjoys doing it.

The role you imagine for yourself in this collaboration.
- Assume that all necessary tasks are being taken care of – this is your *ideal* role.

The work that actually needs to get done.
- It is up to you whether you discuss this earlier or later in the conversation. Some groups would feel like this conversation was too unstructured if they discussed the actual work that needs to be done last; others will be limited by practical considerations if they discuss it first.
- This might be a good time to start discussing compensation for the work you're doing, both immediately and in the future.

Roles worksheet

Before your conversation, get your mind working by quickly writing the answers to some basic role-related questions:

What do you like to be responsible for in a work setting? What do you hate doing?

What do think you're good at?

If you could choose one thing to be completely responsible for, and one thing to never work on, what would those things be?

If you could learn how to do something related to the project, what would it be?

If you could write your own job description for this collaboration, what would it say?

Now what?

At this point, you've discussed what you each want to be doing and how you think you'll get there. But how can you use this information?

1. Now that you know what everyone wants to be doing, and what everyone needs to be doing, you can assign short-term roles. Try to balance things so everyone is doing as much of what they like – and as little of what they don't like – as possible.

2. Take the time to assess any tasks that were on everybody's "love" or "hate" list. Make sure the solution you come up with feels fair to the whole group. Don't assume it feels fair just because someone goes along with the plan.

3. Take the opportunity to also write long-term roles based on everyone's ideal job descriptions. Use this as an opportunity to plan. What needs to happen to move everyone from their short-term to their long-term role? You might want to update your goal list with some of these ideas.

4. Consult your lawyer to see if you should memorialize your roles in a contract or other document, especially if you made decisions about compensation that aren't in writing yet.

Conversation Three: Strengths & Weaknesses

WHAT ARE YOU BEST – AND WORST - AT?

Although difficult, it is important to be really honest with yourself and with each other in this conversation. No one wants to admit that they are terrible at time management, terrified of public speaking, impatient with customers, or can't keep a work space neat to save their lives, but we all have areas where we don't shine, and that's OK.

We also all have areas where we shine. Discuss those even if they don't seem directly relevant to your project, because everything you're good at is a potential asset.

Since it can be hard to be objective about yourself, see if you can get input from people who know you well or have worked with you before. They will have an interesting – and possibly unexpected - perspective.

Hopefully, you'll find that you have a really balanced team, but you might discover that you have some serious weaknesses in common, or that someone's strengths aren't consistent with what they will be doing. In that case, make a plan for strengthening or outsourcing weak spots so work can be distributed in a way that works well for all of you.

There might be some areas where you are all happy to let the strongest person lead, and others where you wouldn't want one person to take over. Talk about what kind of input you want the group to have on things that one person is primarily responsible for.

Be open about bad habits, both the ones that drive you crazy in other people, and the ones you have that are going to drive everyone else crazy. Get them out in the open, talk about them, and see if there are ways to minimize their impact before you get into high-pressure situations together.

Strengths and Weaknesses Discussion Guide:

If you need a little prompting to get your conversation started, here are some things you can explore:

The circumstances that bring out the best and worst in you: When do you do your best – and your worst – work?
- Keep in mind that every strength has a corresponding weakness, and vice versa. The team member who works really well under pressure might have trouble getting things done without a deadline, and the one who diligently completes every to-do list item three days early might struggle with last minute emergencies. The idea is to know what brings out everyone's strengths and weaknesses so you can take advantage of the strengths and minimize the weaknesses.

- You might find that there is a lot to talk about here. Keep it brief at this stage, but make some notes so you can refer back when you get to work styles later. Or, if you want to keep going, jump right into the work styles discussion when you're done with strengths and weaknesses.

Your trouble spots: What do you tend to avoid dealing with?
- Everyone has things they don't like dealing with. Maybe you avoid conflict (more on that later) or you're a procrastinator, or you just have trouble getting started on things. Being open about that at the start will let other people help you with those trouble spots.

What you bring to the table: What do people who work with you value the most about you?
- We all have things we think we are good at, and they are not always the same things that other people compliment us on. By thinking about what others have found valuable about you, you'll unlock areas where you shine without realizing it. Talking about this can also set the group up to be their best selves as they start working together, since everyone wants to live up to the good opinions they are sharing.

Your bad habits: If you asked the people who work closely with you – in professional settings and at home – what would they say your bad habits are?
- The habits that drive other people crazy aren't always the ones we personally identify as weaknesses, so it is useful to discuss this from another person's perspective.

Strengths and Weaknesses worksheet

Before your conversation, get your mind working by quickly writing the answers to some basic questions about your strengths and weaknesses:

Write yourself a brief performance review based on a job or or project you did that is similar to the one you are about to start. What did you do well, what did you do badly, and where did you show the most improvement over time?

What are some good things people you've worked with have said about you? And bad things?

What mistake have you made in the past that you don't want to repeat on this project? What have you done in the past that you do want to bring with you into this project?

What is something you want to get better at? And something you could help someone else get better at?

Now what?

At this point, you've discussed your strengths and weaknesses and you know each other a little better. But how can you use this information?

1. Revisit the roles you wrote during the last conversation and see if anything could use adjustment based on what you learned here.

2. Revisit your goals and make sure you are fully taking advantage of the strengths in your group.

3. Decide if there is anything the group can do internally to strengthen a weak area. If so, make a plan.

4. Decide if there is anything the group can do externally – for example, outsourcing work or seeking education and advice – to strengthen a weak area. This will probably require some research, so assign the project to someone and plan to check back in a week or two.

5. If you're working with a business coach or mentor, get their input about weak areas. They will probably have good suggestions!

Conversation Four: Work Style

WHEN, WHERE, AND HOW DO YOU LIKE TO WORK?

In any group, you'll find many different ways to work. Some people like to work alone, others together. Some people want to pull an all-nighter at the last minute, others want to finish well ahead of time. Some people like to get feedback along the way, others prefer to present a finished project. Some people want to work in a busy, noisy room, others in total quiet.

The only thing we all have in common is that we all think our way is "normal."

When it comes to how we work, understanding the preferences of the people you're working with will help you work together better. Even where preferences don't seem compatible, you can usually accommodate them, at least some of the time, if you are aware of your difference. You can even use differences to make your group stronger – you'll probably need people who work well in different conditions at some point. If adjustments are needed, it is easier to make them if you discover the issue early, and not on the eve of a deadline.

When it comes to where we work, it might not be possible to give everyone exactly what they want, but you can usually give everyone enough of what they want to make them comfortable. Remember that everyone doesn't have to work in the same way or the same environment all the time. To the extent that you can, try to allow your team the freedom to work how, when, and where they are most productive. If most of your time will be spent in a shared work space, give everyone input, and see if you can allow each member to structure their own space to some extent. If you will be working from separate places, either due to the nature of your project, your finances, or your preferences, look for ways to support any members who prefer a more structured environment.

Tip: This conversation will flow easily out of the strengths and weaknesses conversation, so consider having them in the same meeting.

Work Style Discussion Guide:

If you need a little prompting to get your conversation started, here are some things you can explore:

Physical: What are your ideal, physical working conditions?

- Do you want to be on a soft couch in your pajamas? In a fancy office with a great view.? In a noisy coffee shop?
- Think about noise and activity level, and the availability of "distractions" like other people, food, and things to do.
- Also think about more personal aspects of comfort. Does dressing up make you feel your best, or do you think better when your pants have a drawstring? Do you want to be able to do a load of laundry at lunch time while working from home, or do you need your workplace to be separate from your home environment?

Team and solo work: How do you like to involve other people in your work?

- Do you work best when you have uninterrupted time to work by yourself, or do you like the energy of a team working together? Think about type, timing, and amount of involvement.
- What is the most helpful way for people to give you feedback? Early in a project? After you've completed a first draft? Do you want feedback in writing, or do you prefer a conversation? How do you best handle criticism?
- When you are working as a team, how do you like to split tasks, and what kind of collaboration is most helpful for you?

Time: When do you like to work, with respect to day-to-day schedule and deadlines?

- Nine to five, or a different set of hours? Morning person? Night owl?
- What about downtime – do you like to have a strict schedule of work hours and time off, or do you prefer to work – and rest – on your own schedule? And if group members have different preferences here, can they respect each other's free time?
- Do you prefer to have several projects going at once, or do you like to devote your attention to one thing at a time?
- With respect to deadlines, people with extreme preferences will probably have to compromise. But you can probably allocate last-minute tasks and long-term projects so that preferences are honored at least some of the time.

Work Style worksheet

Before your conversation, get your mind working by quickly writing the answers to some basic questions about your work style:

When and where do you like to work?

How do you feel about noise, other people, interruptions, etc. when you're working?

How do you prepare yourself to start a project? (Planning, outlining, consulting others, jump right in, etc.)

Where do you do your best thinking? (At your desk, on a walk, etc.)

What kind of input and feedback do you most value when you're working on a project with other people?

Now what?

At this point, you've discussed your work styles and you know what everyone needs in order to be happy and productive. But how can you use this information?

1. Think about how to set up your work spaces and schedule so that everyone gets as much of what they need as possible. Whether you are arranging an actual office space or planning for home offices and a schedule of in-person or virtual meetings, there are ways to accommodate different preferences.

2. Make a plan for time off that gives everyone the type and amount of time off they need. This is especially important if you have some people who want to work around the clock, and others who need set "off the clock" hours.

3. If different people like to collaborate in different ways, consider letting group members take turns leading projects using their preferred style. This can work well if everyone is willing to learn from each other. But be mindful of strong preferences and make sure no one is being set up to fail every time a certain person is in charge.

4. Talk to your attorney about your preferred schedules to make sure they are legal and accurately reflected in any contracts or other documents about your responsibilities. Get advice about how you might have to adjust your plans if, for example, you brought in an employee.

Conversation Five: Risk Tolerance

WHAT KIND OF DECISION MAKER ARE YOU?

We all tend to think the amount of risk we are willing to take is the right amount. Someone more cautious is a coward; someone more daring is reckless. But risk taking, like all personality traits, exists on a spectrum, and you're probably working with people who are on a different part of it than you are.

In fact, it is good for a group to include people with varying levels of risk tolerance. This means you can balance each other out and make better decisions. However, it can also mean you drive each other crazy.

Assessing your comfort with risk ahead of time will help you appreciate what each person's perspective brings to your project, instead of always feeling like your partner is trying to drag you off a cliff or hold you back. And it will help you get a feel for each other's boundaries and come up with ways to prevent your project from going too far in either direction.

What if you discover that you and your business partner have the exact same risk tolerance? Talk about that, too! If you both hate taking risks, talk about how that can be an advantage (you won't rush into anything stupid), and a disadvantage (you might miss a great opportunity). See if you can create a system that allows you to make smart, not just safe, decisions. If you both love taking risks, have the same conversation in reverse. What can you do to build some caution into your decision making?

> *Tip: The most important things to take from this conversation are respect for each other's different approaches to risk and a willingness to look at things from different perspectives.*

Risk Tolerance Discussion Guide:

If you need a little prompting to get your conversation started, here are some things you can explore:

Decision making process: How long does it take you to make a decision, and how do you go about it?
- Consider how much information you like to get before you make a decision, how you go about collecting that information, and how you feel when you ultimately decide.
- Talk about personal and professional decision-making, and group and individual decision-making. This will give you information about how each person approaches decisions (do they jump right in, or are they paralyzed by information, or something in between?) and will also help start a conversation about how you want to make decisions as a group, and what you want to do if you don't agree.
- Remember that context matters. Some people are very comfortable taking risks in certain situations, and very cautious in others. Don't label yourself or others before you have explored this.

Feelings about missed opportunities.
- Do you tend to kick yourself for missed opportunities, or do you usually feel you made a good decision after deciding not to pursue something?

Past risk taking/risk avoidance: Can you recall a lot of missed opportunities in your life? Alternatively, can you think of things you pursued and wish you hadn't?
- This question will give insight into everyone's risk mindset – someone who has strong feelings of regret when an opportunity is missed will approach decisions differently than someone who tends to reframe the missed opportunity in a way that makes them feel they made a good decision in letting it pass.

Future/ideal approach to risk: How do you want to approach potentially risky decisions going forward? As a group?
- Talk about what you each need to feel comfortable taking a risk, or choosing not to take a risk.
- Are there circumstances where someone will have veto power? What will you do if there is strong disagreement?

Risk Tolerance worksheet

Before your conversation, get your mind working by quickly writing the answers to some basic questions about your risk tolerance:

On a scale of 1-10, where 1 is completely risk averse and 10 isn't happy unless he's jumping out of a plane, where do you think you are? Why?

Where do you think the other members of your group fall?

Do you think you would be better off if you were more or less of a risk taker than you are? Can you think of advantages to being both more and less of a risk taker?

Imagine you turned down a risky investment that ultimately proved to be very lucrative. How do you feel?

Now what?

At this point, you've discussed your risk tolerance, you know where everyone stands, and you hopefully have some appreciation for other's perspectives. But how can you use this information?

1. Hopefully, you talked about decision-making and how you'll approach decisions as a group. Try out some of those ideas to see how they work on low stakes decisions so you can perfect the process before getting to the big stuff.

2. Practice seeing things from other points of view. If you have a group with very different levels of risk tolerance, have people "switch places" as you discuss some low-stakes decisions. See if they can look at the decision from the perspective of their more and less cautious collaborators. Even if everyone is on the same page, this exercise encourages the group to think about points of view that may be missing.

3. If you come to any agreements about how you'll approach decisions involving risk, run those decisions by your lawyer to see if they should be included in any of your documents.

Conversation Six: Third Parties

If you go forward with your project, at some point you will need to involve other people. Those other people might be involved in a limited, outside capacity – think service providers and outside professionals. They might be employees, volunteers, interns, or others who are part of your day-to-day work. Or their involvement might be more complicated – at some point, for example, you might decide to bring in partners or investors.

Involving other people in your project raises financial, legal, practical, and even emotional concerns, and discussing it ahead of time is a good idea. This conversation is a useful planning tool, and also has the potential to shine light on important values and priorities.

Some of this discussion is straightforward and practical. For example, how will you decide whether or when to devote resources to hiring? Do you see yourselves seeking investment and if so, how do you plan to get there? And do you need the services of outside professionals right away? You won't be able to answer all of these questions definitively, because things will change as you move forward, but you can get a general idea of each person's comfort level.

This discussion can reveal deeper areas of agreement or disagreement. For example, when you are looking for an outside professional, an employee, an investor, or another collaborator, where do you look first? That seems like a straightforward question, but if you assume you'll hire friends and family first, but your partner doesn't want to, you have something important to talk about. Conversations about future investment can reveal important differences around how each person feels about money and debt. Talking about future hiring will give you information about how each of you sees your project growing.

Tip: It can be helpful to have this conversation on the same day you talk about money, because there will be overlapping issues.

Third Parties Discussion Guide:

If you need a little prompting to get your conversation started, here are some things you can explore:

Employees: Do you see yourself hiring employees, and if so, when and how?
- Talk about how you think you would make hiring decisions – both the decision to hire in the first place, and the decision of who to hire. Do you imagine yourself hiring friends, family, or people you've worked with before?
- What if you disagree?
- How do you see yourselves managing employees?
- Are there areas where you already know you're going to need help soon?

Partners and Investors: Do you think you might need additional partners or investors? Under what circumstances would you consider it?
- Explore this from your current perspectives, and also talk about what might make each of you change your minds in the future.
- How do you feel about sharing control of your project with others? Do you have ideas about how you would want shared control to work? Are there things you need to retain control over?

Service Providers: Do you need professional work or advice – lawyers, financial professionals – right away or in the future?
- If you need help but can't afford it yet (a common situation to be in) how soon will you allocate money to these areas? And what can you do in the meantime to protect your project?
- How will you choose the professionals you work with?
- Do you all want to oversee outside professionals, or will someone be primarily in charge of those relationships?

Priorities: Where do you think it is most important to bring in third parties? Since most projects start on a budget, you probably can't do everything immediately, and you'll have to prioritize.
- At what point is it worth it to you to hire someone, rather than putting in more hours yourself? Does the balance tip as soon as you can afford the help, or not until you don't have any more of your own time to give?
- What about professional help – is "preventative" outside help a priority, or would you rather wait until you have a need?

Third Parties worksheet

Before your conversation, get your mind working by quickly writing the answers to some basic questions:

When you imagine your project as a success, what does your team look like? Think partners, employees, outside help – who will you need to get where you want to go? Think general categories and also specific people, if you have someone in mind.

If you could bring in either an employee, an outside professional, an investor, or another collaborator immediately, which one would you choose and why?

How would you like the group to make hiring decisions, both for employees and outside help? How do you want to be involved?

How do you want to handle disagreement about involving other people in the project?

Now what?

At this point, you've talked about the issues that might arise as other people get involved in your project. But how can you use this information?

1. Hopefully, you found a lot of areas of agreement and came to some decisions around how to handle any areas of disagreement. Consider memorializing the plans you've made, and share them with any business coach, attorney, or other professional who is working with you to get their input.

2. If you have decided that you won't be involving any third parties in your project in the near future, make a note to revisit that decision. Remember that doing research and getting advice now could set you up for an easier decision later.

3. If employees, investors, or outside help are a priority, add it to your goals and work out the steps to get there.

Conversation Seven: Money

Different people have different approaches to money management, and these approaches can be deeply personal and emotional. Talk about it early, when you aren't facing big financial decisions, so you'll have a better understanding of each other's perspectives once you do have to make those choices.

First, talk about money from the perspective of where you are right now, to get an idea of how each of you is thinking and feeling about the resources you have. Explore feelings of anxiety, and also feelings of hope and optimism – it's common to feel both. Talk about priorities to see if there are areas you can adjust to keep everyone comfortable.

Also imagine yourselves into the future. Money might be scarce at the moment, and your thoughts and feelings reflect that. On the other hand, money might not be a problem because you have relatively few expenses. Try to imagine how your perspective might change as your financial situation evolves.   This will help you communicate about money as you move forward.

Don't just talk about what, talk about *why*. Understanding someone's feelings about finances and why they feel that way will help you have productive – and compassionate – conversations when things get tough and big decisions have to be made. Money is solid, practical, and mathematical, but it is also something that most of us have some serious feelings about.

Tip: It can be helpful to share previous experiences with money. Not only will you get to know each other better, you'll learn about the financial knowledge and skills each of you brings to the collaboration.

Money Discussion Guide:

If you need a little prompting to get your conversation started, here are some things you can explore:

Current situation and priorities: What resources do you have now, and where does each of you want to focus those resources?
- It can be helpful to talk about this first, so everyone feels confident that they have a good handle of the current reality before jumping into the future.
- Expect and welcome disagreement. You don't have to completely agree on a set of priorities, you just need to discuss them. Knowing where people want to put their money will tell you what matters to them.

Imagined futures: How could your current situation change, and how would you want to respond to it?
- Here it can be helpful to look back at your goals, which will give you a roadmap of where you're hoping to go. You can use that to imagine the different money issues that might pop up along the way.
- Think about what you'd do if you had extra money to play with. How would you budget if you didn't have enough? And what position would you need to be in to feel comfortable taking financial risks?

Hopes and anxieties: We all have feelings about money. Those feelings change how we behave, whether we like it or not.
- Remember that feelings change as situations change. Talk about how you expect (or hope) to react to different financial events.
- Think about financial decisions and challenges you've been through in the past. How did you react? Would you do anything differently if similar issues arise again?

Knowledge and skills: We've all had to deal with money, so we've all developed skills and acquired knowledge about it.
- You might have someone who is great at making and sticking to a budget, someone who is a good investor, and someone with little interest in managing money but a talent for bringing it in. To the extent it is relevant to your project, put these skills to use!

Money worksheet

Before your conversation, get your mind working by quickly writing the answers to some basic questions about your attitude to money:

Looking back at your financial life up until now, what feelings, knowledge, and skills have you picked up, and where did they come from?

If you could change something about the way you think or feel about money, what would it be?

On a scale of 1-10, where 1 is "save every penny" and 10 is "what's the point of money if I don't spend it?" where do you think you fall? Why?

Does this project have money-related issues, or do you anticipate any later? What are they, and how do you hope to deal with them?

Now what?

At this point, you've discussed your thoughts and feelings about money. But how can you use this information?

1. Talk to your accountant, other financial professional, or lawyer to get their input and advice.

2. If you have agreed on some priorities, start putting them into action, even if that just means making a list or timeline.

3. If you discussed priorities but didn't reach an agreement, schedule some time to follow up on specific issues. Look for creative ways to address everyone's priorities even if there isn't enough money to allocate to everything.

4. Assign tasks based on the knowledge and skills you uncovered in this discussion.

Conversation Eight: Approach To Conflict

HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH CONFLICT?

Just by reading this guide, you are demonstrating your commitment to dealing productively with conflict in this collaboration, and that's great. Discussing your approaches to conflict and feelings about conflict will help turn those good intentions into action.

We all want to believe that we are great conflict resolvers, and most of us have the knowledge and skills to *become* great conflict resolvers. But before you can have a useful conversation about how you *want* to resolve conflict, you have to explore the way you *actually* resolve conflicts.

No one wants to admit that their conflict resolution style is yelling, total avoidance, or complaining to other people. But this is something to get out into the open so you can start talking about how you want to resolve disputes with each other.

Even someone with great conflict resolution skills will have a weak spot or two. Maybe you are great at difficult conversations, just as long as nobody's yelling. Or you're a skillful mediator when others have a conflict, but avoid dealing with it when you're directly involved.

In this discussion, talk honestly about the best and worst habits you are likely to bring to the conflicts that inevitably arise in a group of people working together. You might find that your conflict styles work very well together. For example, two passionate arguers who raise their voices easily and then quickly forgive might work well together without much adjustment even though they would struggle in a group with a quieter approach to conflict. You might find that you need to adjust in order to create an environment where everyone is comfortable contributing.

The most important thing is not to assume that your way of dealing with conflict is everyone's way.

Tip: We all have the ability to change, so don't get stuck in a "this is just how I am/they are" mindset. A yeller can learn not to yell at people. An avoider can learn to speak up.

Conflict Discussion Guide:

If you need a little prompting to get your conversation started, here are some things you can explore:

Outside influences: Do you have a good day/bad day conflict style?
- For example, are you a great problem solver when you've had sleep, food, and a good morning, but a screamer when you're feeling stressed or run down? Think about how outside circumstances influence your response to conflict.
- Almost everyone is going to have a set of circumstances that brings out their best problem-solving skills. Talk about ways to make sure that as many of your difficult conversations as possible happen within these ideal conditions.

Volume, time, and turn taking.
- How does each of you feel about raised voices?
- How much time do you like to spend considering and preparing before you discuss something important or difficult?
- When you are having a discussion, are you most comfortable with an informal back and forth, or with more formal turn-taking?
- There are no wrong answers here, just different preferences.

When and how do you prefer to address problems?
- Do you like to address problems early and often, or do you prefer to let the little things slide and address only the big issues?
- What conflicts can be raised in informal communications – for example, an email or as part of another conversation – and which ones require intentional, scheduled discussions?

If your group was going to write a philosophy of conflict, what would it be?
- How would you, as a group, have to think about and approach conflict to make it a positive force in your collaboration?

Conflict worksheet

Before your conversation, get your mind working by quickly writing the answers to some basic questions about how you deal with conflict:

How would you describe your general approach to and feelings about conflict?

What are some good and bad things that can come from conflict?

When you disagree with someone, what do you do? If your response changes situationally, what situations bring out your different conflict personalities?

What is the worst thing someone else in this group could do in a conflict with you? (Focus on things that might actually happen, don't go straight to violence.) Best thing?

What is your worst habit when you have a conflict with someone else? Your best habit? Is there a "best way" to resolve conflict?

Now what?

At this point, you've discussed how you generally deal with conflict, and how you want to deal with it in this collaboration. But how can you use this information?

1. Write down that philosophy of conflict and use it to come up with some ground rules for future, difficult conversations. Those rules can be as formal or informal as your group culture demands. There is no right or wrong way to do this.

2. Practice! You probably have some tough decisions to make right now, so pick one and work through it using your conflict rules to see if what you came up with leads to a better conversation. If it doesn't, revise your rules.

3. Seek out resources to strengthen any weak spots you found in your conflict and communication styles. These might be resources to help specific group members with their weak spots, or resources for the group to use together. Consider books, videos, and trainings.

Conversation Nine: Success & Failure

WHAT IS YOUR PLAN FOR SUCCESS… OR FAILURE?

You probably started to have this conversation back at question one, when you explored your goals. But it is so important that it deserves its own entry, just in case you missed it (or didn't go into it deeply because you mostly agreed).

The success part of the conversation is fun, and should be easy now that you've already talked about your goals. Discuss what success looks like to each of you, and what the next step is after you reach that milestone. Do you move on to bigger and better things together? Go your separate ways? Stick with it until you've built something huge? Also, explore the ways you measure success, since that can be vary greatly from person to person.

And now, the less fun part of the conversation. What if you don't succeed? Is there a point where you'll need – or want – to cut your losses? This isn't something we like to talk about, but planning for failure takes away some of the fear about it.

Explore the ways you're willing to sacrifice to make your project work, the limits to that sacrifice, and the reasons for those limits. Of course, you don't want to imagine a situation where you have to give up on (or drastically change) your plans, but talking about it ahead of time will help you be on the same page if things don't go the way you want them to. You'll be less likely to take each other's decisions personally and more likely to find creative ways to get through tough times. And, even if you can't make your project work, your collaboration won't end on bad terms.

Tip: You can't be sure how you'll feel about any of this if and when it actually happens. Making a firm plan isn't the goal, you just want to start the conversation.

Success and Failure Discussion Guide:

If you need a little prompting to get your conversation started, here are some things you can explore:

Commitment over time: What are the stages of this project, as it relates to the time, money, and/or energy you are each devoting to it?
- What are you each able to give to the project, and for how long? Encourage everyone to be realistic here.
- Are there things that must happen on a certain schedule, either for the project itself or for individual members? These may be financial milestones or other indications that you're moving in the right direction.
- Are there clear signals to look for in deciding where you are and where you're going?

Talking about "failure": If you find that you aren't reaching your goals, how and when do you want to talk about it?
- Discuss whether you prefer to focus on the positive or the negative as you evaluate progress, and whether different preferences could cause misunderstandings.
- Checking in on your progress regularly is probably already on your to-do list. This is the time to normalize the more difficult part of that discussion. Make it acceptable and expected for group members to talk openly about success and failure at your goals check-ins, and commit to reacting without judgment or defensiveness.

Endings: If the project (or one person's work on it) does end, what would that ending ideally look like? How can you set things up to make that ideal ending more likely?
- Can you envision a situation where one of you wants to continue the project without the others? Or where one of you wants to leave while the others want to move forward? How would you make that work?

Success and Failure worksheet

Before your conversation, get your mind working by quickly writing the answers to some basic questions:

What does success in this project look like to you, and what are signs that you're on your way there?

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At what point would you consider ending this project? Before getting to that point, are there other steps you would want to take?

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Are you comfortable discussing the possibility that you won't succeed? When other people raise that possibility, how do you feel about it?

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Is there a limit in terms of time, money, and/or other resources that you can put into this project?

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Now what?

At this point, you've discussed success and failure and you know what your group needs in order to say committed. But how can you use this information?

1. Some of what you talked about might belong in your contracts and other legal documents. Discuss this with your attorney.

2. Practice talking about both best- and worst-case scenarios. If you find that some of you are very good at thinking about one type of scenario, but not so much the other, practice taking that less-popular perspective. The goal is to get comfortable talking openly about what's going well and what isn't.

3. Acknowledge and accept each other's boundaries and limits. This makes surprises and hard feelings less likely if someone reaches the end of what they can contribute. To the extent possible, plan for those possibilities.

Conversation Ten: Relationships

WHAT KIND OF RELATIONSHIP DO YOU WANT TO HAVE, DURING AND AFTER THIS COLLABORATION?

This seems obvious when you are going into business with friends or family, because you have pre-existing relationships to preserve. But it's a topic that often goes unexplored. Friends and family may avoid the relationship discussion because it brings up difficult issues. They may also avoid it because they think their relationship is strong enough to withstand anything. But every relationship has challenges. Adding another layer to the relationship in the form of a shared business or project inevitably complicates things.

So, if you are working with friends or family, have the conversation even if you don't think you need to. Talk about how you want to work together, and also how you want to relate outside of work. Discussing this ahead of time will make trouble less scary when you run into it.

What if your collaborators aren't friends or family? Does that mean your relationships will be "all business"? Probably not. You will develop relationships by working together, for better or for worse. With some planning, you can help ensure these relationships are positive.

If you are starting with a blank page, think about the kind of relationships you want to create. What environment and activities will promote those relationships? You might want your group to become friends as well as colleagues. Or, you might want firm, professional boundaries around your relationships. More likely, you want something in between. If you don't talk about this, you'll get whatever arises naturally, and that might be fine, or it might not. Talk about it early so you can develop your relationships intentionally.

Tip: Remember that "work" and "socializing" aren't always distinct activities. You might want to have some of your work meetings in a more social environment, or set up your work day or work space to promote social interaction.

Relationship Discussion Guide:

If you need a little prompting to get your conversation started, here are some things you can explore:

Company Culture: Big companies talk a lot about their "company culture," but all groups, even very small ones, develop a culture when they spend a lot of time together.
- Has your group already developed some kind of "company culture"? If so, what is it and how do you each feel about it?
- What do you want your group's culture to be like, and what kinds of actions will build that culture?
- Are there differences in what each of you wants, and if so, are there ways to incorporate some of everyone's preferences?

Socializing: Do you want to see each other outside of work? Even a very formal workplace often has some amount of out-of-work socializing, so think about this even if you don't imagine weekly happy hours.
- Do you hope to be friends as well as colleagues? If so, how can you encourage friendship to develop? Are there things everyone is interested in doing together? Based on your current relationships and interactions, do you think these activities will be welcomed by everyone?
- What about time/energy/money commitment? Talk realistically and nonjudgmentally about how much everyone feels able to devote to work-related socializing. Make sure you don't create social obligations that become burdensome.
- If you are already friends or family, how separate will work and personal relationships be?

Endings: If someone leaves the project, what kind of relationship do you want to have with them?
- No one wants to end a job or project on bad terms. Are there things you can do to set your group up for peaceful separation if the time comes?

Relationships worksheet

Before your conversation, get your mind working by quickly writing the answers to some basic questions about your relationship:

What is your current relationship with the other members of the group like? What do you want to keep the same, and what, if anything, would you change?

What kind of relationships are needed for your team to work together well on this project?

Are there any outside-of-work activities you'd like your group to do together? If you already spend time together outside of work, do you want to work or talk about work during that time?

If you come to the project with existing relationships, how should your roles be different (or not) when you are working compared to when you are relating as friends or family?

Now what?

At this point, you know what kinds of relationships you want to cultivate in this group. But how can you use this information?

1. Depending on how detailed your discussion was, you may have made decisions that require your lawyer's attention, so check in.

2. If you are already friends or family, ask yourselves if anything you discussed should be shared with others in your circle. (For example, a "no work talk at family dinner" rule might be something to share with other family members who eat dinner with you.)

3. If you have decided to cultivate new friendships within your group, start planning one of the activities you discussed in your conversation.

4. If you had a good conversation about the culture you want to cultivate in your group, put it in writing. This will be useful as you move forward, especially if you hire employees or bring others in.

In Conclusion

I wrote this workbook from the perspective of a mediator and conflict coach, but other people have different types of expertise, and will have different sets of questions for you.

Think about asking the people you rely on for help with your project – such as financial professionals, lawyers, and mentors – to give you their own top ten lists of questions to ask your business partner or team. You might be surprised to find that they highlight issues you never would have thought about on your own.

Make conversations like this a habit in your life, not just in your business. Discussing how to work well together will help you in any part of your life that requires teamwork.

And remember that things change, so plan to have these kinds of discussions more than once. It's helpful to have regularly scheduled check ins where you discuss issues that don't come up in day-to-day communication. Don't put things off to deal with later – problems thrive on neglect. If you find yourself avoiding or having unproductive discussions about certain topics, look at it as an opportunity to improve your communication.

About Leigh Chandler

Leigh Chandler has a passion for helping people resolve their disputes. After spending many years practicing both mediation and litigation, she now devotes herself to mediation full time.

Leigh works primarily with groups that need to or want to continue working together. She helps small businesses, family-owned businesses, start-ups, creative collaborators, neighbors, and others resolve conflicts and move forward. Over one or more sessions, she helps her clients resolve the specific disputes that brought them to mediation, while also improving their communication and problem-solving skills so they can resolve future disputes more easily. Leigh also offers "preventative" mediation for groups embarking on a joint project and seeking to avoid future conflicts.

In addition to her law degree, Leigh Chandler has a Masters in Dispute Resolution from the Straus Institute at Pepperdine University.

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CONFLICT HAPPENS

make it constructive

In our fast-paced world, disputes arise every day.

Business partners, band members, co-workers, and even club members are not immune to disagreements.

But it doesn't have to be this way!

"Conflict Prevention for Collaborators" guides you through ten conversations to have at the start of any working relationship. By following this workbook, you will have better conversations, better work environments, more productivity, less stressful ventures, and greater success.

Whether you are part of a small or large team, this workbook will help you get started on the right path.

LEIGH CHANDLER works with groups to resolve dynamic conflicts. In addition to her law degree, Leigh Chandler has a Masters in Dispute Resolution from the Straus Institute at Pepperdine University.