



Conflict Resolution: Simple But Not Easy (Blame Your Gremlin)

Conflict resolution is, in theory, quite simple. Yet who among us hasn't experienced times when our common sense flies out the window and even the most basic skills desert us. Those times demonstrate that conflict resolution may be simple, but is far from easy. Let's see why.

Most approaches to collaborative conflict resolution incorporate a few common principles:

- Hear the other person out
- Ask them the reasons for their perspective
- Explain your perspective
- Explore ways to move forward

This seems pretty basic and logical, yet conflict often devolves into an argument (or is avoided at all costs for fear it will erupt.) Even conflict resolution professionals will sheepishly admit to “losing it” from time to time in the heat of the moment. A friend and colleague is an M.I.T. graduate and former aerospace engineer. He tells people “this conflict resolution stuff isn't rocket science – it's a lot harder.” What makes it so?

I blame our “gremlins” - imaginary, invisible beings who revel in causing mischief. In his simple, yet insightful book *Taming Your Gremlin: A Guide to Enjoying Yourself*, Richard Carson uses the term to represent the unhelpful inner voice – the “narrator in your head”. In applying Carson's work to conflict, I've discovered specialized “conflict gremlins” that hinder us from resolving conflict effectively. They usually reflect our natural impulse to fight, flight or freeze. In fairness to our gremlins, they mean well and believe they are helping us survive. But the fight or flight impulse that serves to protect us from a physical threat will undermine our efforts to resolve interpersonal conflict.

A fight gremlin, for example, fuels our self-righteousness and urges us to protect ourselves by attacking the other person (or their harebrained ideas.) If you find yourself thinking “How dare they!” “What a jerk.” and “I don't have to take this!” you are likely tuning in to your fight gremlin. Flight gremlins, on the other hand, reinforce our role as innocent (and helpless) victim, whose survival depends on avoiding the conflict. Thoughts like “Get me out of here!” or “Help – this isn't safe.” earmark the flight gremlin. Even the impulse to freeze in the face of conflict stems from a basic survival impulse (“if I don't move, maybe I'll blend in with the woodwork and no one will notice me”.) While this may work for a deer in the woods, it hardly helps us resolve a conflict.

So what can you do with your gremlins? Firstly, acknowledge and accept them. Debating your gremlin simply empowers it and distracts you. You'll be better off to reflect on when and why they appear. In the movie *A Beautiful Mind* the central character, John Nash, is asked whether he still sees his imaginary friends (symptomatic of his mental disorder.) He replies "No, they're not gone. But I've gotten used to ignoring them and as a result I think they've given up on me." This is sound advice for dealing with gremlins. Gremlins are so effective in sabotaging our conflicts because we don't even recognize them. Here are a few things you can do to keep your gremlins from sabotaging you in conflict:

1. Know your triggers. We all experience certain behaviours, mannerisms or words that anger us and dim our capacity to reason. Being aware of your triggers allows you to depersonalize those attacks, maintain your cool, and deal with these behaviours constructively.
2. Remember to breathe. As elementary as this sounds, the tension that accompanies conflict often constricts our breathing at a time we most need to relax and centre ourselves. Even taking one or two *deep* breaths will buy some time to assess the situation and avoid knee-jerk reactions. (And while you're breathing in, you won't be talking!)
3. Develop an inner coach to remind you what you know in theory, but forget in the moment. Your inner coach might remind you to "breathe", reassure you that "this isn't life-threatening" or encourage you to "slow down". You can create an inner coach by asking yourself what you would most want to remember in the heat of a potential conflict. I've found the mantra "stay curious" has proven invaluable over the years, both personally and professionally.

Skills and knowledge are necessary to resolve conflict, but will be useless unless we remember to employ them. So next time you find yourself in conflict watch for your gremlin. When it appears, acknowledge it, thank it for its input, but trust your inner coach instead. You will be pleasantly surprised at how "simple" things will seem and how effective you will be.

For more on conflict gremlins, get Gary Harper's book, *The Joy of Conflict Resolution*. For more on gremlins in everyday life, see Richard Carson's book *Taming Your Gremlin: A Guide to Enjoying Life*.