

understanding conflict

your guide to what it is,
and how to work through it.



rainbridge

Rainbridge Resolution Services
Empowering you to build bridges that last.

welcome

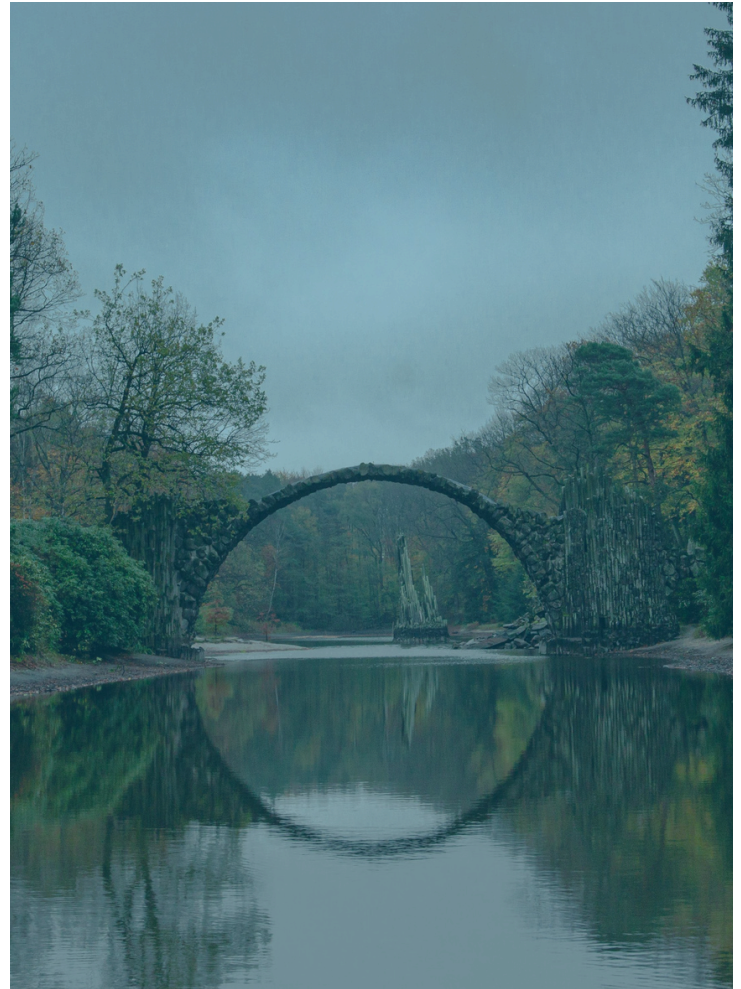
Conflict is something we all experience - at home, at work, in our relationships, and in community. And yet, most of us were never taught how to understand it or talk about it, let alone how to navigate it with clarity and care.

This guide was created to help change that.

Whether you're feeling overwhelmed by a specific conflict or just looking to strengthen your communication skills, this resource is designed to give you language, insight, and confidence. We believe that conflict doesn't have to be chaotic or destructive, it can be a turning point.

How to use this Guide

At Rainbridge, we know that conflict can feel confusing, frustrating, or even isolating. But it's not inherently negative - and it's not something to fear. It's simply a sign that something needs attention, clarity, or change.



This guide is here to help you:

- Understand that conflict is natural and not inherently negative
- Recognize the types of conflict you may be experiencing
- Learn about common conflict resolution approaches (including but not limited to mediation)
- Reflect on which approaches might suit your situation
- Reduce fear or avoidance around conflict

You don't need to read this cover to cover (though you're welcome to). Use it like a map:

- Skip to the sections that feel most relevant
- Pause and reflect on any questions or examples that resonate
- Print it out, highlight it, or keep it bookmarked—whatever works for you

This is not a diagnostic tool or one-size-fits-all formula. It's an invitation to better understand conflict - and yourself - in a way that supports forward movement, growth, and connection.



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what is conflict, really?

Conflict is part of being human. It doesn't mean something is broken. It means something matters.

Conflict happens when we experience tension, disagreement, or misalignment—whether that's about values, needs, goals, expectations, or communication styles.

Conflict is a signal - not a failure. And when approached with care and clarity, conflict can be an opportunity for better understanding, stronger relationships, and meaningful change.

Why Conflict Happens

Some of the most common reasons conflict arises include:

- Miscommunication: Messages get lost, misunderstood, or never fully expressed.
- Unmet needs: Emotional or practical needs go unheard, unseen, or unacknowledged.
- Power dynamics: Real or perceived differences in authority, access, or influence can create tension.
- Changes or transitions: Shifts in routines, relationships, roles, or expectations can stir up uncertainty or friction.
- Clashing values or identities: Differing beliefs, cultural norms, or lived experiences may shape how we view or respond to situations.

Not every conflict feels the same. Some are sharp and obvious; others build slowly or simmer beneath the surface. Some can be resolved in a single conversation; others need time, support, or facilitation.

All of them deserve care.



five types of conflict

Conflict shows up in many forms, not all of them loud or obvious.

Understanding what kind of conflict you're facing can help you respond with more clarity and care.

A few common types of conflict you may encounter:

1. Intrapersonal 🧑

Conflict within yourself is when your needs, roles, or values feel in tension.

Examples:

- You want to set a boundary at work, but worry about being seen as uncooperative.
- You've agreed to host a family holiday but feel overwhelmed and resentful.



2. Interpersonal 🧑🧑

Conflict between two people is often rooted in miscommunication, unmet needs, or differing expectations.

Examples:

- A loved one dismisses your concerns, and it's affecting trust.
- A friend consistently shows up late, and it's starting to feel disrespectful.
- You and a co-worker disagree on how decisions should be made, creating ongoing tension.

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3. Group / Team 🧑

Conflict within a group often involving dynamics of power, inclusion, or unclear roles.

Examples:

- A volunteer committee struggles because a few voices dominate while others feel unheard.
- A workplace project stalls because no one is sure who's accountable for key decisions.

4. Organizational or Systemic 🏢

Conflict related to systems, structures, or policies often involving patterns of exclusion, inequity, or harm.

Examples:

- Staff feel discouraged from giving feedback after seeing colleagues penalized for speaking up.
- Tenants feel dismissed by a property management company after repeated safety complaints.

5. Cultural or Values-Based 🌍

Conflict rooted in deeply held identities or beliefs including language, religion, gender, or social norms.

Examples:

- A neighbour's Pride flag sparks complaints from others in the condo board.
- Divorced co-parents argue about whether their child should attend religious services, based on conflicting beliefs.

It's typical for a situation to involve more than one type of conflict. Conflict is layered - and understanding the layers helps us respond more effectively.

conflict styles:

how we respond when things get hard

Each of us tends to lean on certain conflict styles, especially under stress.

The Kraybill model* identifies five main approaches, each with strengths and challenges. These styles are not “good” or “bad”, they’re tools we can learn to use more intentionally.



Directing: High focus on your own goals, low focus on others’ needs.

You take charge, speak directly, and push for quick resolution.

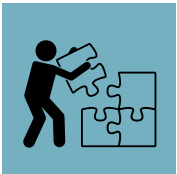
- Helpful when decisive action is needed
- Risky when others feel dismissed or steamrolled



Avoiding: Low focus on your own goals and others’ needs.

You delay, deflect, or step away to keep peace or reduce tension.

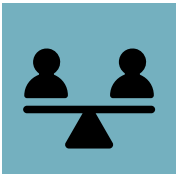
- Helpful when emotions are high and time is needed to cool off
- Risky when issues go unaddressed or resentment builds



Harmonizing: Low focus on your own needs, high focus on others.

You prioritize maintaining relationships, sometimes at personal cost.

- Helpful when preserving peace or supporting someone in crisis
- Risky when your own needs are overlooked or resentment grows



Compromising: Moderate focus on both your needs and others’.

You seek quick, fair solutions through trade-offs or middle ground.

- Helpful when time is short and stakes are lower
- Risky when deeper needs aren’t acknowledged



Cooperating: High focus on everyone’s needs.

You aim for solutions that are creative, inclusive, and sustainable.

- Helpful when building shared understanding or long-term trust
- Risky when the process becomes too slow or complex

*Based on the Kraybill Conflict Style Inventory.

conflict styles:

Our conflict style is not our personality, it's a pattern. With awareness, we can adapt how we show up during conflict - we can change our patterns.

Many people default to one or two conflict styles, sometimes using one style when in a neutral situation, and transitioning (consciously, or not) when a conflict trigger arises. Being able to actively and intentionally shift between conflict styles is a skill that requires awareness and practice.

Self-Reflection Exercise

Which style feels most familiar to you in conflict?

Does your style shift when you're under pressure?

How might your go-to style affect how others experience you?

Which style would you like to strengthen?

approaches to conflict resolution

Conflict can be resolved in many ways - some more collaborative than others.

There's no single "right" way to resolve conflict. The approach you choose will depend on your situation, goals, and how much control you want over the process. Below are some common paths, along with when they work best, potential risks, and what to expect.

Here's a look at some common ways people commonly address conflict - formally or informally.



Informal Conversation: A direct, unstructured conversation between the people involved. Often happens organically or with light planning.

Best when:

- Trust is strong
- The issue is simple or recent
- Both people are open to talking

Risks:

- Can escalate if emotions run high
- May not lead to resolution without structure or support

Negotiation: A conversation aimed at reaching agreement, often without third-party support. Can happen with or without legal/HR involvement.

Best when:

- Both parties are motivated to resolve
- There's mutual understanding of issues

Risks:

- Power imbalances can affect outcomes
- May stall or become positional



Consensus Decision-Making: A collaborative process where everyone contributes to the outcome. Used often in community groups, collectives, or teams.

Best when:

- Group values equity and shared ownership
- Relationship preservation is key

Risks:

- Can be time-consuming
- Requires skilled facilitation to avoid gridlock

approaches to conflict resolution

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Restorative Process: A structured, facilitated conversation focused on acknowledging harm and rebuilding trust. Can include those who were harmed, those who caused harm, and the broader community.

Best when:

- There is willingness to take accountability
- The goal is healing or reintegration

Risks:

- Can re-open wounds if readiness isn't there
- Requires safety, consent, and skill



Mediation (Voluntary): A structured, confidential process guided by a neutral third party. All decisions are made by the participants, not the mediator.

Best when:

- There's a need for structure and support
- Parties want to repair or move forward

Risks:

- Won't work if one or both parties aren't willing to engage honestly
- May require multiple sessions

Pre-Trial Mediation (Mandated): Mediation required by a legal or administrative process. Similar in format to voluntary mediation but often with shorter, formal timelines or legal consequences.

Best when:

- There's a clear legal issue and both parties want to avoid court
- A judge or tribunal requires it

Risks:

- May feel rushed or pressured
- Emotional needs can be overlooked



approaches to conflict resolution

Conflict can be resolved in many ways - some more collaborative than others.

Conflict Coaching: One-on-one support to reflect, build skills, and prepare for future conversations. Focused on personal growth, not directly resolving a specific conflict.

Best when:

- The other party is unwilling to engage in resolution
- You want to reflect, develop self awareness, shift conflict patterns

Risks:

- Self-focused work doesn't truly resolve a conflict
- Requires engagement from others for long term impact



Complaint or Investigation Process: Formal processes guided by policies, often used in workplaces, schools, or institutions. Typically involves an investigator or HR.

Best when:

- A policy violation or legal risk is involved
- Formal documentation of evidence is needed

Risks:

- Can feel adversarial or slow
- Often focuses on blame rather than repair



Arbitration: A private, binding process where a third party makes the final decision. Often used in commercial contracts or when required by policy or a contractual agreement.

Best when:

- Both parties want closure
- Legal enforceability is important

Risks:

- Less space for dialogue
- Limited appeal options
- No control over outcome



Litigation: A formal legal process decided by a judge or tribunal. Usually involves legal representation and strict timelines.

Best when:

- Legal precedent, protection, or accountability is necessary
- Other efforts have failed

Risks:

- Expensive, time-consuming, and emotionally taxing
- No control over outcome



your path towards resolution

Considering your options for conflict resolution?

There are multiple approaches to conflict resolution. Some people use more than one approach, at different stages or for different needs. Some situations require it. There's no wrong place to start. If you're unsure which approach to conflict resolution is best for you, consider talking it through with a trusted advisor, mediator, or legal counsel.

Approach	Voluntary	Collaboration	Cost	Time	Confidential	Control of Outcome	Relationship Impact
Informal conversation	Yes	High	None	Immediate	Usually	High (you decide)	Depends
Negotiation	Yes	Medium-High	Depends	Short-Medium	Usually	High	Depends
Consensus Decision-Making	Yes	Very High	Low	Medium-Long	Usually	Shared	Strengthens
Restorative Processes	Yes	High	Moderate	Medium	Usually	Shared	Strengthens
Mediation (Voluntary)	Yes	High	Moderate	Short-Medium	Yes	High	Strengthens
Pre-Trial (Mandated) Mediation	Mandated	Medium	Depends	Short (Time Limited)	Usually	Moderate (external pressure)	Depends
Conflict Coaching	Yes	N/A (Individual)	Moderate	Flexible	N/A	N/A	Personal growth-focused
Complaint / Investigation	Depends	Low	Moderate-High	Medium-Long	Rarely	None (decided externally)	Often worsens
Arbitration	Often Mandated	Low	High	Medium-Long	Limited	None (arbitrator decides)	Low / Depends
Litigation	No	Very Low	Very High	Long (months-years)	No (public record)	None (judge decides)	Worsens



Considering mediation? Consider Rainbridge.

Conflict is complex, but understanding it is the first step toward navigating it differently.

You don't need to be an expert, have all the answers, or get everything "right." What matters is that you're willing to learn, reflect, and ask for the help you need to move towards resolution.

We're here to support you with clarity, compassion, and care.

Let's connect

If you're curious about mediation, need clarity on your next steps, or just want to talk through your options – we're here to listen.

rainbridge.ca

connect@rainbridge.ca

brighter conversations begin here.

[Click here to schedule your free consultation](#)



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