

EVERYONE CAN WIN audio script edition

SKILL 2. Creative response to conflict

Podcast time codes:

Mins/secs	Topic
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8.27	Win-win: fight, flight, freeze
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“Life’s not about how to survive the storm, but how to dance in the rain.”

That’s a wonderful quote running round the internet. Whoever first wrote it, it’s incredibly apt as we learn to use conflict as our opportunity for positive change. This is skill number 2 from the book, *Everyone can Win*, about handling conflict constructively. Today we will be polishing your creative response to conflict. And that begins with asking ourselves: ‘Is this a problem or a challenge?’

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With skill number one in our previous session we chose our win-win strategy by stepping back from opposing positions. And then investigating each person’s needs, so that we steer towards the best possible outcomes for everyone involved. This second skill, creative response, focuses on our mindset as we do this. How to dance in the rain!

The creative response is about turning problems, hostile remarks, even chaos into challenging, creative, opportunities. It’s about making a commitment to head towards the positive, to extract the best we can manage from any situation.

I'm not saying that's always easy, but I do know things go a lot better when I decide to head that way. What do those relationship storms look like? Perhaps:

- A situation looks hopeless and has really got you down.
- You just had a business deal go sour.
- You've missed out on something you really wanted.
- Something you did upset somebody else.
- You've just made a giant boo-boo.
- You thought you'd met the man or woman of your dreams and off they went with your best friend.

Life is going to throw at us all sorts of events that can make us furious or send us sliding into depression or even despair. They test our mettle. They're all important moments to engage our creative response. How do we bring out the best of ourselves and become proactive here? There are four steps.

STEP 1 IS TO CHOOSE YOUR FIRST RESPONSE

When we 'react' we behave impulsively. We're not in charge. We'll tell ourselves that someone or something has made us react that way. We've been driven by fight, flight or freeze, those primitive survival mechanisms that worked well for our ancestors under threat in the jungles. They rarely serve us well for delicate person-to-person issues.

We'll need to *respond*, rather than *react*. We can learn new ways. We have incredible potential way beyond our instinctual reactions. We can choose HOW we'll think about the problem and WHAT we'll do next to turn it around in some way.

At the first signs of conflict we are likely to contract. It's our startle reflex. We disconnect from the other person to separate and protect ourselves or to gather our forces to head into attack. We do it unconsciously. We might experience it as a body sensation, but it's not quite, or not only, muscular. Our emotions, thoughts and energy will follow the contraction into a pretty dark hole.

You're hurt or shocked by what the other person has just said. Of course, sometimes your best response will be to disengage, and leave. But make that your *considered* response, not just a *flight* reaction. Most frequently your best response will be to engage and meet the challenge. Make that your considered response too, not just a lash-out fight back reaction.

That's the time to choose to connect.

So ask yourself, 'What's best here?'

Will I stay? If I stay, can I connect, rather than contract?

Can I flow with this conflict? Our aim is to turn our opponents into partners with whom we create better solutions. Whether or not the other person is also using a win/win approach to the conflict, the skill is to consciously involve ourselves with the other person's energy, flowing with it and directing it positively at each opportunity.

Sound travels, light travels, so does your energy. It is directed by your attention.

Let's talk a little more about energy.

The study of physics is all about the mechanics of how energy works. It's the invisible creative force that is directing our whole physical world – from the tiniest particle to the vast movements of the stars.

Our awareness, attention and presence are intricately linked to this underlying creative field. Wherever we place our attention, this underlying creative energy follows. If we're focusing on a new project, we'll sense its support helping us move forward. And it feels good. We're flowing along. When we meet a conflict, it is a conflict *because* this energy is blocked. And we feel very uncomfortable. While we stay contracted, the energy stays blocked. Nothing really shifts. But as we connect with other people, and let ourselves be really present to them, our awareness goes outwards towards them and this underlying field of creative energy tags along too. It's the hidden force that supports positive change. Our attention focuses our awareness *and* the underlying energy – like a beam from a torch playing on the area that needs sorting out.

Say, you feel stung and alienated by something a friend has just said to you. You just can't help it – you react...and contract. Contact falls away. Fix that first. Aim to

connect. Give your friend your full attention. Become as present to them as you can manage. The creative energy will follow your focus and something will begin to shift.

But how do we connect when the truth is that we actually hate the conflict? Firstly, get centred. Remember the spot in your belly from which your energy flows. Take a deep breath. Breathing always helps. Then focus your attention onto the other person as fully as you can. Allow yourself to be present to them and what's going on for them. As soon as you do that, you're connected. You might still be wary but you've moved beyond the contraction. The creative energy for moving forward is no longer blocked.

What happens next? Just do the next ordinary thing that comes to hand to do. You might ask a question or find yourself settling back and taking a deep breath. Any strategy you design will do better when you're connected. There's more rapport and more trust. Our behaviour naturally becomes more appropriate because we're attending to what is really going on.

You are alone and fretting about a conflict you just can't handle yet. It's getting you down. Put those anxious thoughts to one side just for a moment and as Obi-Wan Kenobi says in the Star Wars movies: 'May the force be with you.' Just for a moment or two, direct this unseen creative energy onto 'all about this problem.' Do so by giving the issue your *open* attention. In other words, don't go into any details. Just overview it and bathe it in that positive creative energy. You're paying attention on purpose to the unknown, that field where nothing is necessary, but anything is possible. It's a form of mindfulness practice. It naturally includes your desire that things will work out well ultimately for all concerned. Just don't try to dictate the how's or what's of this.

Offer your attention and energy will follow.

And energy creates change.

Try this connecting thing about the rest of your day today. Take a second to conjure some sense of... 'all about your day.' ...Now connect to that whole sense of it and *greet* it, give it a moment of your best attention. You don't know what it will bring. So be intimate with it, mover your attention closer so you can find out. Offer it a welcome as you would

a good friend arriving at your front door. Try it on something you're really looking forward to. It will help you be touched by it and enjoy it even more.

Once you begin to trust that your conscious connecting actually does make a difference, begin doing it for any event that could be rather fraught. At first you may have to pretend that you are offering it some sort of welcome. But try to imagine that it could actually hold a new opportunity for you – even though you have no idea yet for what. Say, it's your least favourite party, a difficult meeting, a project you keep putting off, a tough negotiation, even a court hearing. Mentally greet or acknowledge the event, move your energy outwards to meet it and include it. Connect to the people involved, and particularly acknowledge those you're presently in opposition to or just don't like very much. Maybe you imagine yourself giving them a respectful bow. You're taking charge of the atmosphere. You're becoming proactive.

If you're not quite there yet and you have the time, just take a little longer to mentally greet, acknowledge and connect to the all factors involved. It's a learned skill.

Now how well have you connected? Are you ready to say to yourself:

'Ah, conflict. What an opportunity!'

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If you still can't believe that this situation has a chance to transform into an opportunity, you are probably running an internal monologue that's competing with this new intention.

Much of our mind-chatter is built on resistance, an inner state of 'NO!' to whatever's going on. A judgement we make about 'That's not right, that's stupid, that shouldn't be.' So as well as choosing to make contact, we'll bring out the best of ourselves if we can take:

STEP 2, TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE SITUATION FOR WHAT IT IS

This doesn't mean we have to like it, or agree when we just don't. Of course we don't enjoy listening to someone complain, and we mind when we don't get the help we need.

But it does mean that we accept that that's how it is or how they are, or that they believe that.

Perhaps they were incredibly careless and something important has slipped through the net. Our standard reaction to such an issue might be fury. Our mind chatter is running riot. But hey! This mistake has already happened! Our lashing out about who was right and who was wrong is actually a form of self-protection. It keeps us away from really experiencing this new and uncomfortable reality. Can we first arrive where we currently are? The state of affairs now? 'We've got a terrible mess to sort out!' Perhaps what we've really got to accept is: 'They did leave me for someone else.' Or 'We did lose that big client.' First start with the facts, without the emotions. It's 'just... so.' Hold that mind chatter. Hold off that judging business long enough to settle into it.

Often this is just a small shift. After our initial reaction, our internal thoughts can slide reasonably easily along something like this: 'Oh well, that's how it is. Might as well face it.'

But sometimes acceptance is a really big transition and won't happen quickly. Sometimes the issue is so huge, that it includes all that is, has been, will be and perhaps can never be in that relationship. Perhaps it's about health, your own or someone you love. Perhaps it's about a huge disaster in your personal circumstances. Acceptance might take months, even years. But there can be many small positive steps towards it along that way. And each step is in itself a great achievement.

You'll certainly know when you've really acknowledged even a part of a big issue. It might come with a sigh. It's like you are letting down into the situation. And then you can sense how it really is for you. You stop holding yourself away from it. You stop fighting it and your judgements about it fall away. And your actions as you address some part of the issue are more grounded, and naturally more appropriate. You're inside it now and able to live from that base.

Big issue or smallish, all you are doing is:

Acknowledging, really acknowledging, the situation as it is, right now

You stop fighting the facts.

Pause for just a moment. Have you got something in your life that's really distressing you? ... Say very gently to yourself... 'That's how it is. That's how it is.' ... Notice your breathing changing...

Does 'acknowledging' mean that you give up? Not at all. You still press forward towards something better. It's just about *starting* that push from where you actually are. When you really *accept* the problem, you can take charge and steer your response.

Now can you say:

'Ah, conflict. What an opportunity!'

Sometimes it feels like you are asking yourself to settle down on a bed of nails. You try to accept what is so, but up pops 'But, but...they should not have spoken to me that way.' OR: 'They ought to be doing their share of the work.' 'They must do what I say.' OR: 'This is so unfair!' Our mind-chatter just won't settle down, and it's extremely negative. Can we get to the root of this problem? Sometimes it's because there's:

A Perfection mindset colouring our thoughts.

It's insidious and our judgements can invade even the smallest incidents. Our thoughts run rampant about someone who leaves their dirty coffee mug in the sink, or the car beside us on the highway that won't let us change lanes. We're judging ...everything!

There's a constant stream of mind-chatter going on:

- Is this good enough or not? (Usually not ...)
- Does this meet my standards? (and it's a pretty high bar we set!)
- Who's right here?
- They're just sooo stupid.
- How dare they!

- This is a disaster!
- This should not be!

Of course you might also be rating yourself against that Perfection measuring stick. How do you pull yourself down? Like this?

- What's the point of trying? I'm never going to get anywhere.
- I'm no good at this.
- I'm frightened they won't like me.
- I'm wearing the wrong clothes!
- I didn't get enough done today. (That's my one, I can beat myself up a lot with that!)

These poor ratings that we impose on ourselves are at the root of a lot of our negative thoughts. We're using a Perfection measuring stick. We'll find winners and losers all over the place – at the kitchen table with your partner or the kids, in traffic jams, at work with your boss or co-worker. Conversations slide all too easily into who's right and who's wrong.

If we demand perfection, we won't take a risk for fear of getting it wrong. We'll work too hard, we'll get depressed and we're very likely to alienate others around us. This demand for perfection is leading us into anxiety, isolation and frustration. And it stops us accepting what is! It's our bed of nails. It's these judgements that that stop us resting down into reality. We're suffering from a faulty world view.

Because life is not about being perfect.

We are not perfect, and no one is!

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Jake

Talking about mind chatter, Jake told me about when he'd bumped into an old acquaintance of his in a coffee shop queue. He made the mistake of asking how he was and the guy immediately bombarded him with his conspiracy theories on COVID-19 and G5 technologies.

Jake was irritated. His mind-chatter started racing... *'This guy's a nut job ... 'He's a twit'... 'How could anyone carry on like that?'*

Jake would have loved to ignore him, but the reality was that they were both stuck together for the time being, waiting for their coffees. So Jake put his judgements to one side and instead reminded himself: *'Ah, conflict! What's a creative response here? What's the opportunity?'*

'OK,' he thought, *'this is another human being. I really don't like his ideas. But let me hear what the world is like for him.'* Jake chose to connect and asked him: *'What would you like to see happen in regard to all this?'*

Well, the guy's ideas on better communication and openness from the government and about personally protecting his family weren't that unreasonable! It was probably true that the general public don't have the full story, and that there are no definite reassurances available.

The queue was moving slowly, so Jake helped the conversation along by asking the guy if all this made him want to move away from the city. He said that he wanted to, but his wife wasn't willing and this was causing a lot of conflict and confusion at home. Jake could relate to him much better as he opened up a bit about that. He listened to the guy's issues and found a couple of points of contact.

Jake said that as they parted company, they both smiled warmly at each other. Usually after seeing him, he kind of have to shake him off. I asked him what had made the difference and he said it was because he'd chosen to connect this time. He'd accepted how he was. Obviously the interaction had worked out a lot better. Jake seemed quite pleased with how he had handled that enforced chat.

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Life is not about being perfect. Life is actually about new possibilities and it's about learning, and conflicts are our school.

STEP 3 IS TO OPEN YOURSELF UP TO LEARNING SOMETHING NEW FROM THE CURRENT SITUATION

Can we replace our Perfection mindset with one that's all about **Discovery?**

What does that look like? When we were young children first learning to walk, we didn't go "right foot", "wrong foot", Each fall was as interesting as the next step. Everything was part of this great walking experiment, including the tumble. We all start life with a Discovery mindset. We're curious. The Discovery mind-set says: "How fascinating! What are the possibilities here?" We need to reclaim that natural curiosity as adults. We can ask ourselves:

- What can I learn here?
- I wonder what this is really about? Or,
- How else could I see this? Or perhaps
- I wonder why this is so important to them.

- What's a creative way to handle this?

“That's interesting, why did that happen?”

When we engage our Discovery mindset, we reconnect with our curiosity, enthusiasm, and urge to explore. If we accept ‘what is’ right now, we can begin to play with the possibilities.

Asking ourselves ‘What can I learn here?’ helps us to shift from fixed positions, and to consider a much broader range of options, ones that might suit everyone a whole lot better. Perhaps you'll find new doors opening that you'd never have explored without the problem.

A model of perfection arises from our desire for excellence. That's the goal. But as we've just discussed, the path to that goal is strewn with judgements and all their downsides. A model of discovery also captures that desire of excellence, but in a much healthier way. Excellence becomes the path itself, rather than the destination.

Allow for mistakes.

With a discovery mindset, there are no failures, only learnings. When you fall down, you pick yourself up and note where the pothole was, so you can walk around it the next time. A person who has gone “too far” knows just how far they can go.

No “winners – and – losers”, just “winners – and – learners”.

Risks and learning go together. Some of our best learnings come from our mistakes. The compulsion to always be right also stifles initiative. An organisation which tolerates errors and allows a reasonable amount of risk-taking attracts a dynamic staff. If they know they won't get bawled out for the error and that there's support for them to fix it or move beyond it, they'll be much more open.

Have you noticed that you have more respect for another person who can comfortably admit to a mistake? It actually makes them appear *more* trustworthy in your eyes.

Mistakes will still need correcting. You might have fallen short of your goals, and want to do better next time. If an important contract is cancelled, you'll want to rethink and regroup. With your Discovery mindset, you acknowledge the problem and then

immediately use it as an opportunity for exploration and learning. Recovery from errors builds our resilience and does wonders for our self-esteem!

Don't let your self-esteem depend on always being right, even though it does take courage, for example, to call a halt to a project that's not working out, particularly if it means admitting to a mistake. We're likely to defend our self-image in the face of our errors. We can even find it hard to recognise our errors if too much depends on never making them.

When we're willing to learn, we are *proactive* in conflict. And that's quite different to forcing our point of view onto the situation. We allow room for developing another point of view, for seeking out a different solution to the one we first envisaged. Perhaps there is something that could be different in the future.

We take responsibility. That is 'response-ability' – our ability to respond. The problem becomes a playground for exploring, learning, understanding, addressing issues and moving forward. We empower ourselves; we take ownership of problems; we take the initiative. Our thoughts are on moving forward.

A good question can be our best friend on this path. Like ...

- 'Does this problem offer a doorway to some new understanding or a better method?'
- 'How can we improve this situation?'

We may even begin to get a tickle of **excitement**. Problems begin to look like intriguing puzzles – with something better hiding below the surface waiting for us to bring it out.

- "What will make the difference so that he stops complaining to me all the time?"
- "What else can I try to get the kids to help with washing up?"

- “What are we freed up to do now that \$7 million order has just been cancelled?”
- Ask ‘What’s possible now this has happened?’

Good questions hook the mind and draw out that underlying creative energy. Answers will begin to trickle, or sometimes, pour in. And life becomes fascinating!

I have a favourite question I ask myself first thing each morning: ‘What wonderful thing can I say ‘yes’ to today?’ It helps me to:

Set sail for the positive

Have you ever told yourself how you want things to turn out? ‘It’s going to be just fine’; ‘It will all work out’. You often determine how something will turn out by how you think about it beforehand.

If you have to attend your spouse’s office party and you decide it will be awful, it probably will be. Try instead: ‘Something particularly good is going to happen. I wonder what it will be?’ Decide to make the best of it and you’ll find ways to have a good time. Your attitude directs your actions and helps make things come out well. Just another opportunity for turning frustration into fascination!

Here’s another example: You’re worried about a new idea you’re trying to push through at work. Is it really such a good one? Will others block it? Try: ‘The best answers are going to emerge here’. Rise above wanting a particular outcome, just be clear that however it turns out, that will be its best direction. Then the underlying creative force can work its magic – as long as we don’t try to direct it too closely.

You’re running late for an appointment. Ask yourself: ‘How come this is actually perfect timing?’

Perhaps you’re facing the end of a relationship. So far you haven’t been able to reconcile your differences. You’re meeting tonight to sort it out or finish it. Whichever way it goes, you want to see the outcome as the best. As you cope with the butterflies in your stomach, you ask yourself: ‘How will the greatest good emerge from *this*?’ Set sail for the positive and then live in your question. By and by, the answers will come. No, it might not be a happy ending, and that might really *be* the happy ending when you can look back on it from the future.

Set sail for the positive, just don't determine what that positive is going to look like. Stay open to the possibilities.

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Karen

I regard **Karen** as rather an expert on creative response. She's very clever about quickly diffusing difficult situations. So I listened up when she told me about her recent experience when she was checking in at the airport for a plane trip. She was a little late. That's usual for Karen. She knew her bag was rather overweight. That's pretty usual for her too, but she usually gets away with it. She was next to be served, but the man behind her counter looked harassed and closed off. It wasn't looking good for her, late *and* with an overweight bag. She shrank inside herself. (I guess we'd now call that a contraction) Her mind-chatter went to: "He's going to bring bureaucracy down on me!"

Then she did a quick reframe on her negative thoughts: "Come on, Karen! How can you make this OK? Are you going to react or respond?" Here's what she told me she did: "So I mentally reached out and connected with him, let my energy flow towards him, greeting him in my mind from afar, as though we'd just been waiting to meet each other."

"It could be worse," she joked to him as she arrived at his desk. "I could have six heavy bags and five screaming kids." She said her comment scored a half-smile as he stared at his screen! He informed her there

were no more window seats (She'd requested one) and so she came back with, ""Gosh, it's hard to complain when I'm the one who was late!"

He seemed to appreciate that she wasn't taking it out on him. He smiled a little more... Creative response was working... He didn't charge for her overweight bag. She thanked him and genuinely wished him a good day and rushed off to catch the plane. She was both relieved and proud, she'd made the best of a difficult situation for them both.

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Where are we at in these steps to arouse our creative response?

- You've taken step 1 and consciously chosen to set aside your reactions and instead make contact and flow.
- You've taken step 2 and acknowledged the situation for exactly what it is right now and stored that perfection measuring stick well out of the way
- and you've taken step 3 and opened up to learning something new from this issue.

So, now you really are well on the way to:

STEP 4: TURNING THIS CONFLICT INTO AN OPPORTUNITY

– like turning sour milk into yoghurt, making lemons into lemonade. Now we're really proactive. We search out the opportunities the situation has to offer. And perhaps we start thinking outside the square. We might develop a wide range of options and we've lots of

tips for that later in this series. But for now, we're cultivating the mindset for that creative response – in the face of everything!

- You've been at war with the office printer for years. Management won't replace it, and it's always giving trouble. It's broken down again, just when you need to reproduce your report for an important meeting. What's possible now this has happened? How fascinating!"

Transform **frustration** into **fascination**. Try 'Ah, how fascinating!' next time you're grinding your teeth in irritation. Analyse how to prevent it happening again, or to find out what is still possible. This is the creative response that will head you back in the right direction, and make you feel better and more resourceful.

Every conflict is an opportunity to grow a wise heart. You want to be able to say with confidence to yourself: **Ah, conflict! What an opportunity...**

So, root out negative attitudes

Negative attitudes will often sneak in to sabotage us as we try to transform conflict into opportunity. They can pop into our or other people's chance remarks. Listen to the negative attitudes in these: 'I'll never be able to tell him'; 'She won't listen'; 'It's all hopeless'; 'It's useless trying to do anything'; 'I'll never get through all this work'; 'I can't play the piano'. These are the sounds of 'helpless' and 'hopeless' in our throwaway lines. They'll get in our way.

So, try these little reframes instead: 'I *don't* know how to tell him *at the moment*'; 'She doesn't *seem* to listen'; 'It seems hopeless *right now*'; 'I haven't figured out what would help at this stage'; 'I need *a plan* to help me get through all this work'; 'I *haven't* learned to play the piano *yet*'.

Offer slight reframes to the other person too, when they seem to be implying that they're 'helpless' or 'it's hopeless.' A little tweak that implies something has been wrong *so far*, but that could change in the future.

Who knows what life might bring through if you leave the door open! Change those negative attitudes and the world just might shift.

Ah, conflict. What an opportunity!

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HERE'S THE SUMMARY

Creative response is all about how we prepare ourselves to meet a conflict. We're after a mindset that will turn problems into opportunities or fascinating challenges. We've discussed four steps.

Step 1: Choose your first response

- Move past your initial reactions and begin to flow. You are taking charge of your response and steering where you want to be heading.
- So, connect, rather than contract. Make contact, rather than close off.
- Offer the situation your focused attention and the underlying forces of creative energy will play their part. Energy follows attention and energy creates change.

Step 2 is to acknowledge the situation for what it is.

- Start from there.
- Working out who's right and who's wrong stops you coming to terms with the facts. So, put your mind-chatter aside and let go of judging everything by unrealistic standards of perfection.
- Stop fighting the facts. They're your home base. It's from there that you can head forward to positive change.

Step 3 is to open yourself to learning something new from this situation

- Pull out your discovery mindset and greet each issue with an attitude of inquiry and exploration.
- Allow room for mistakes. There are no failures only learnings.
- Good questions hook the mind and draw out your creativity. Ask yourself: 'What can I learn here?' 'Is there a better way to handle this?'

- Set sail for the positive. Open to the possibilities.

Step 4 is about turning this conflict into an opportunity

- Ask yourself questions like: ‘Given the facts, what’s possible now?’
- Hopeless and helpless attitudes don’t support your creative response. Reframe your own and other people’s statements so that they leave doors open to future change.
- Turn your frustration into fascination.

Ah, conflict, what an opportunity!

Do have a look at our website, at Conflict Resolution Network. Our headquarters are at crnhq.org. We have transcripts of these audios and there’s lots of extra reading and training material for you to look at.

Join me again when we move to skill number 3 in our toolkit for resolving conflicts constructively. It’s about building empathy. It comes in two parts as there’s a lot to learn on this topic. Things go much better when the climate between you and others is warm rather than cold.