

TEAM CONFLICT

Conflict is a natural and normal element of professional and personal interactions, plus *all* Relationship Systems—any grouping of two or more people—require *productive* conflict to function well. Whether expressed capably or not-so-capably conflict signals that change is trying to happen, e.g., organizational shifts, team adjustments, or leadership growth. Two primary factors that impede productive conflict (a.k.a., “fighting right”) are conflict avoidance and “fighting wrong,” i.e., initiating, engaging in, or exacerbating negative conflict via toxic communication patterns or behaviors.

Researcher John Gottman dubs the most common toxic communication styles *The Four Horsemen*. These are the ones deployed most often in everyday life at work and at home. While Gottman’s research focuses on personal relationships, his findings assist with—and are being applied increasingly in—professional contexts, too.

Please note: There are far more toxic conflict styles than the following Four Horsemen, e.g., verbal or physical abuse, gaslighting, bullying, or other coercive practices. ^ Please seek immediate help from a therapist, HR, the authorities, or appropriately trained professionals for those challenges.

Contempt/Disrespect: Condescending or degrading communication via what you say, e.g., put-downs, *or* how you say it, e.g., biting sarcasm or eye-rolling. Some people disguise contempt (or criticism) by claiming humorous intent, e.g., “I was *joking!*” or deflecting responsibility, e.g., “You’re *so* sensitive!”

Criticism/Blame: Critical communication involves making things personal—what *you* did or said that’s wrong, how *you* are the problem—versus gently complaining about or neutrally referencing a challenging issue. Also, blame is sometimes expressed nonverbally, e.g., through dissatisfied grunts or looks.

Defensiveness: Here, you resist accountability for your role in creating or contributing to negative conflict, sometimes by resorting to excuses, and sometimes by reflexively counterattacking. The phrase “having a chip on your shoulder” also applies whether expressed verbally, e.g., “Not *my* job!” or non-verbally, e.g., crossed arms.

Stonewalling/Silent Treatment: Stonewalling involves walking away from conflict or remaining physically present yet refusing to speak or engage about a tough topic. Stonewalling is the unwillingness to productively discuss a contentious issue and manifests as literal or figurative withdrawal.

Requesting a break or a timeout if a conflict becomes unproductive is *not* stonewalling. Asking for a break is a skillful intervention in fighting wrong.

When you communicate via one or more Horsemen, then, *style overrides content*. That is, *how* you express yourself trumps *what* you say. Things worsen if you avoid calmly addressing the issue at a later time—preferably within 24 hours—or resist repairing from the impact of Horsemen. Repair is central to skilled conflict resolution in professional as well as personal contexts. It enhances team and organizational effectiveness and employee engagement.*

Let’s differentiate stonewalling—a refusal to engage—from **flooding**: Psychological and physiological overwhelm as a response to stress, trauma, or conflict that makes it almost impossible to have a productive, problem-solving conversation. Symptoms include feeling a stress-hormone “rush,” accelerated heartbeat, labored breathing, overactive sweat glands, or an inability to focus or speak. Flooding can happen in concert with any of the four Horsemen, not just stonewalling. If you or the person you are speaking with floods, take a break and revisit the issue after everyone self-regulates, which takes anywhere from twenty minutes to twenty-four hours for those who flood.

A few ways to shift from toxic communication to productive conflict:

- **Educate:** Provide this information to all team members to facilitate a shared understanding and vocabulary.
- **Agree:** Admit your go-to Horsemen—the one(s) you trot out most—and invite others to name theirs, too.
- **Assess:** Try to discover the underlying goal(s) you’re trying to meet, even if unskillfully, via Horsemen, and brainstorm ways to articulate your goal(s) more skillfully.
- **Create:** Give Horsemen silly names or sing a song about horses to signal their appearance and to invite laughter.
- **Resolve:** Revisit unproductive conflict without Horsemen to find ways to compromise *without* resentment.

^In addition to the highly toxic patterns listed in the box, [Dr. Ramani Durvasula](#) notes that highly toxic people possess traits that render them unable to “fight right,” to disagree productively or respectfully. She offers the acronym C.R.A.V.E.D. for guidance: Conflictual, Rigid, Antagonistic, Victimized or Vindictive (or both), Entitled, & Dysregulated. If you work with someone with these traits, productive conflict is *highly* unlikely no matter your skillset.

*Repair takes many forms, the most effective of which is a *sincere* apology. Some people also repair by assisting with a task, requesting a do-over, admitting their reaction was unskilled, or another conciliatory effort. A mutually satisfactory resolution—e.g., genuine compromise, agreeing to disagree, increased mutual understanding—sometimes also serves as a form of repair. Repair efforts only land if they are either shared by the person with whom you try to repair, or that person recognizes your repair effort.