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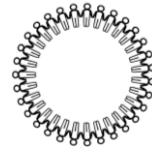


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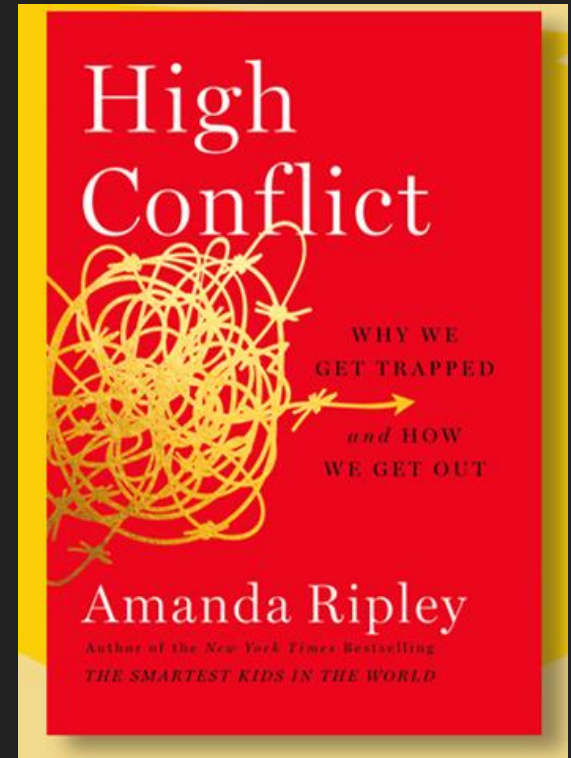
Join the [‘CliffsNotes’ club](#)—where there's no pressure to pre-read the book, no membership required, no cost, and lots of discussion in just 90 minutes. Each month, you will hear a [summary of highlights](#) from a recently-published business book. This discussion summary is intended to provide a recap of the conversation at Book Club, rather than serve as a thorough book summary. We'll keep you "in the know" on the latest and greatest concepts and models. [Register here](#) for upcoming events.

High Conflict

*Why We Get Trapped
and How We Get Out*

By Amanda Ripley

Facilitated by Laura Bowles



What's the difference between High Conflict and Healthy Conflict?

Healthy Conflict:

- Useful friction
- Pushes us to be better people
- Not surrender/not forgiveness
- Can be stressful and heated, but dignity remains intact
- Does not collapse into caricature
- Remain open to the reality that none of us has the answers to everything all the time, and we are all connected
- Needed to defend ourselves, to understand each other, and to improve
- ***Curiosity***

High Conflict:

- Good vs. Evil (with an Us and a Them)
- Each encounter becomes more charged
- Feel increasingly certain of our superiority
- More and more mystified by the other side
- Feel dread or rage when we encounter “them”
- Whatever we do to try to end the conflict only makes it worse
- Hard to resist, magnetic

Trapped in the Tar Pits

- La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles.
- A small dark lake of natural asphalt.
- Scientists have found more than three million bones trapped in the depths of these pits, including well-preserved, nearly complete skeletons of massive mammals.
- Mammoths, sloths, more than 2,000 saber-toothed tigers, 4,000 dire wolves have been found.
- How? An animal lumbers into the Tar Pits, quickly becoming stuck in the sludge of asphalt. It's grunts of distress attract the attention of predators. A pack of animals (like the dire wolves) approach and devour the animal, becoming stuck themselves, establishing a vicious and diabolical cycle.



Where are these issues or statements reflective of High Conflict?

- Family feuds over Democrat/Republican tribalism
- Brexit
- Wild wolves
- Cats
- “We are experiencing permanent indignation, a kind of social outrage.”
- Social media
- United States
- England
- Norway/Denmark
- New Zealand
- Germany (quote from President Frank-Walter Steinmeier)
- Anywhere with access to the internet

“Rivalries and hatreds between groups are nothing new,”

Psychologist Gordon Allport wrote in the 1954 preface to his book *The Nature of Prejudice*.

“What is new is the fact that technology has brought these groups too close together for comfort... We have not yet learned how to adjust to our new mental and moral proximity.”

We are all connected. We have to adapt. This is the central challenge of our time. To create institutions and societies designed for healthy conflict, not high conflict. Built to respond to problems without collapsing into dehumanization.

Case 1: Gary Friedman



Case 1: Gary Friedman

- In 1970s, Gary is a lawyer, approached by divorcing friends who want him to represent both of them to figure out the details together. This doesn't exist at this time.
- Gary decides to try it - spurs beginning of mediation process being instituted in US Legal System. Became known as the "Godfather of Mediation".
- Gary pioneers "The Understanding Method of Mediation" and teaches thousands of lawyers, judges, and therapists around the world, taught negotiation courses at Stanford and Harvard - published 3 books.
- In 2015, Gary is invited to run for office in his small town of Muir Beach in Northern California. With the hope of reforming politics in the same way he reformed the legal system with mediation, he campaigns for a seat on his local municipal board.

Accelerants

What stokes the fire of high conflict?

- 1) Group identities
- 2) Conflict entrepreneurs
- 3) Humiliation
- 4) Corruption



Accelerant 1: Group Identities



How they help:

- Give us structure, safety, and purpose
- Create great things (cathedrals, Pyramids, World Cup, symphonies, vaccines)
- Feel each other's pride and joy (Sports Teams)
- Can extinguish conflict
- Obligations to group can encourage peace
- When we recognize the layers of identities we embody, can encourage empathy

How they hurt:

- Make conflict more volatile
- Exert a force larger than the conflict itself
- Generate vicarious experiences, spreading suffering and pride around like aftershocks
- Feel each other's suffering and take it personally, fueling more conflict
- Can ignite conflict
- Obligations to group can encourage violence
- When fixed, easy to create a false sense of "us" and "them"

How do group identities help in the workplace? How do they hurt?

The Power of the Binary

- When groups are created, people change themselves to fit in more readily into the group they're a part of. Forces you to see the world in two dimensions.
- Most people have complex, ambivalent feeling about things like immigration, globalization, democracy, corruption, drug trafficking, and reparations for victims. Knowledge is uneven and opinions are manifold. Referendums force people to choose a side.
- People believe that they can know one another's moral core without actually knowing one another at all.

Accelerant 2: Conflict Entrepreneurs

- Add to the paranoia and hostility
- Seeding doubts and whispering rumors
- Possible examples:
 - Lawyers
 - Family members
 - Journalists
 - People who benefit from the conflict continuing (from solidifying the “us/them” dynamic)



How to identify:

- Learn to recognize the conflict entrepreneurs in your orbit.
- Notice who delights in each new plot twist of a feud.
- Who is quick to validate every lament and to articulate wrongs no one else even thought of?
- Who is using sweeping, grandiose, or violent language to describe the conflict?
- Are rumors, myths, or conspiracy theories present?

Accelerant 3: Humiliation

- Conflict explodes when social pain becomes unbearable. When it becomes something worse than exclusion, when it becomes humiliation.
- “The nuclear bomb of emotions” (Evelin Lindner, psychologist and physician)
- Jeopardizes the deepest part of ourselves, our sense that we matter and are worth something.
- “The enforced lowering of a person or group... strips away their pride, honor and dignity.”
- Feelings of humiliation drive acts of humiliation, can become an addiction.
- Aggression and revenge are ways to escape the pain of humiliation, fueling more aggression.

*“If I’ve learned one thing covering world affairs, it’s this:
The single most underappreciated force in international relations
is humiliation.” - Thomas Friedman, New York Times columnist*



Accelerant 4: Corruption

- Regular people learn they cannot rely on the system, so they seek justice in other ways.
- Violence becomes normalized.
- “Ordinary people become impulsive, quicker to anger, more ready to see violence as normal.” - Rachel Kleinfeld, foreign policy scholar



How do you see the four accelerants impacting conflict in the workplace? Are there other accelerants you would add?

- 1) Group identities
- 2) Conflict entrepreneurs
- 3) Humiliation
- 4) Corruption



Case 1: Gary Friedman (Why He Got Trapped)

Accelerant 1 - Group Identity

- Sorted into a binary - Gary and his allies saw themselves as agents of change, The New Guard, and those who were agents of the status quo were dubbed The Old Guard.
- Won in an “unprecedented landslide” along with another new board member, Elizabeth.
- Focused on the ideological differences instead of “investigating the understory” (his own mediation strategy)
- Resorted to blame and shame attacks - why aren't the reasonable people showing up to meetings?
- Lack of trust made the **idiot-driver complex** harder to disrupt
- He wasn't in the middle as a mediator anymore, he had defined sides and chosen one in the conflict

Case 1: Gary Friedman (Why He Got Trapped)

Accelerant 2 - Conflict Entrepreneurs

“That’s how you deal with these right-wing thugs.”

“In my world, there are two sides, and it’s a war.”

“Part of me feels like we should just run a team and kick them out, just to prove we can.”

-Tanya, Gary’s campaign manager

Case 1: Gary Friedman (Why He Got Trapped)

Accelerant 3 - Humiliation

- Gary implemented strict time limits for public comments and established 23 subcommittees.
- Gary saw himself and his strategies as attempts to increase inclusivity and fairness, in line with his identity. Many stated that they felt this was unnecessarily bureaucratic, telling him it was wasteful and unnecessary. This was a direct affront to Gary's identity.
- After a water price hike that Gary implemented to compensate for previous mismanagement, it became increasingly obvious who identified with which camps and local newspapers hijacked Gary's labels to his detriment.

NEWS > POLITICS > ELECTION

Muir Beach election pits old guard against new

A map of the Muir Beach area in Marin County, California. The map shows the coastline on the left and various land parcels. A dashed black line outlines the jurisdiction of the Muir Beach Community Services District. A dark grey text box is overlaid on the map, containing the following text: "The five-member board of the Muir Beach Community Services District oversees a jurisdiction that includes the residential neighborhood, Slide Ranch, the Pelican Inn and the Green Gulch Farm Zen Center. (County of Marin map)".

The five-member board of the Muir Beach Community Services District oversees a jurisdiction that includes the residential neighborhood, Slide Ranch, the Pelican Inn and the Green Gulch Farm Zen Center. (County of Marin map)

“I couldn’t get it out of my head. It felt like we were at war. I no longer saw them. I no longer had a sense of proportion about me, and I lost myself.” - Gary Friedman

~

“He was taking things to heart. He was getting defensive. There was a ‘good’ team, and a ‘bad’ team, people who were for him and against him. You no longer felt like there was a real back-and-forth; he was sort of talking to himself.” - Cassidy, Gary’s daughter

~

“I feel like we have lost you.” - Sydney, Gary’s daughter

Case 1: Gary Friedman (How He Got Out)



Misery → Saturation point → Golden hour of opportunity

- The Old Guard trounced Gary's allies in the 2017 election, two years after Gary joined the Board.
- Felt humiliated.
- Forced a pause that needed a choice - stay in or get out?

"I felt a deep sense of humiliation, pain, and sadness. We were thrashed. It couldn't have been worse."

- Gary Friedman

Case 1: Gary Friedman (How He Got Out)

Disrupted the cycle of high conflict

- Voted *with* the Old Guard for the new president. Seconded the nomination for the VP nomination, someone with whom he had demolished with an accusatory letter just months before.
- Symbolic concessions

Case 1: Gary Friedman (How He Got Out)

Establish a new identity to be committed to, a new purpose to pursue

- Started investigating his own understorey.
- What is productive here?
- What works?
- Why did he want to do this in the first place? (He'd wanted to prove that there was another way to do conflict.)
- Decided that his true north, his identity, was about helping his neighbors understand one another, even as they continued to disagree.

Case 1: Gary Friedman (How He Got Out)

Broke the Binary systematically

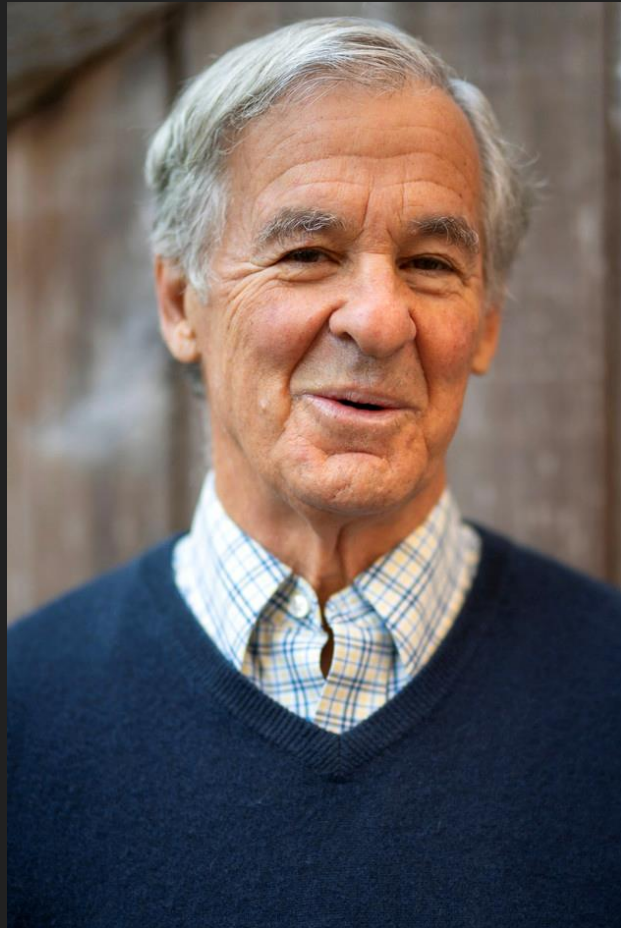
- Vote with an opponent.
- Rehumanize and recategorize his opponents.
- Ask about their health. Smile at them. Find common identities to bring alive (gardening).
- Magic Ratio
- Contact Theory

Much of the time, in businesses, neighborhoods, families and countries, blurring the lines between us and them is like buying insurance for your own sanity. It generates healthier conflict.

Case 1: Gary Friedman (How He Got Out)

Create Distance

- Identify the Conflict Entrepreneurs (firestarters) - let go of Tanya as his political adviser.
- Took calls on speakerphone to intentionally invite a “balcony observer”, his wife.
- 3 questions to make views and ideas more hearable
 - 1) Does it need to be said?
 - 2) Does it need to be said by me?
 - 3) Does it need to be said by me right now?
- Spiritual practices
 - Meditation



If even one of the most equipped individuals in one of the most idyllic places can succumb to high conflict, what can we possibly do about it?



Questions to ask (yourself) to identify high conflict

1. Do you lose sleep thinking about the conflict?
2. Do you feel good when something bad happens to the other person or side, even if it doesn't directly benefit you?
3. If the other side were to do something you actually agreed with, some small act, would it feel very uncomfortable to acknowledge this out loud?
4. Does it feel like the other side is brainwashed, like a cult member, beyond the reach of moral reasoning?
5. Do you ever feel stuck? Like your brain keeps spinning, ruminating over the same grievances, over and over again, without ever uncovering any new insights?
6. When you talk about the conflict with people who agree with you, do you say the same things over and over - and leave the conversation feeling slightly worse than when you started talking?

Questions to ask (yourself) to identify high conflict, cont'd...

7. Has someone who knows you very well told you they don't recognize you anymore?
8. Do you ever find yourself defending your own side by pointing out that the other side does the same thing - or worse?
9. Do you see different people on the other side as essentially interchangeable? If your conflict is with just one other person, is it hard to conjure a visual of that person as the small child they once were, even if you try?
10. Do you use words like "always" "good" "bad" "us" and "them" or "war" when you talk about the conflict?
11. Do you find it hard to remember the last time you felt genuine curiosity about the other side's thoughts, intentions, or actions?

Increase Curiosity with Powerful Questions

1. What is oversimplified about this conflict?
2. What do you want to understand about the other side?
3. What do you want the other side to understand about you?
4. What would it feel like if you woke up and this problem was solved?
5. What's the question nobody's asking?
6. What do you want to know about this controversy that you don't already know?
7. Where do you feel torn?
8. Tell me more.

“Much of the time, in businesses, neighborhoods, families and countries, blurring the lines between us and them is like buying insurance for your own sanity. It generates healthier conflict.” - pg. 98

How does this land with you?

Where do you see yourself in this narrative?

How might this happen in real life?

How might you apply this to your work with coaching clients?

Discussion Questions

1. How do you know when you're in "High Conflict" mode?
2. Do you see opportunities to disrupt high conflict cycles around you?
3. Do you have any personal practices that help you get out of the Tar Pits? Any that you recommend to clients?
4. How do you help clients "create distance or space" when they're stuck in the Tar Pits?
5. Have you known a leader who went out of their way to stay in healthy conflict? What strategies did that person use to stay in a healthy place? What was it like to work for or with that person?