



Reprogramming Your Approach To Conflict Resolution In 2023

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 10 January 2023

The return to the January work routine after the holidays is marked by relief by some employees. This is because it is not always 'peaceful' to spend extended time with family, and conflicts, old and new, can flare up. When these disagreements erupt, it's natural to fall back into the long-established roles of the past. This 'programming', embedded by early experiences of conflict, can also be carried over into workplace relationships. In 2023, how can we rewrite the program, and ensure our conflict operating system runs more smoothly, at home and work?

Read the manual; understand the hardwiring

The first step in installing new behaviors is to recognize that certain habits are hardwired. Attitudes and behaviors are often programmed in the formative years of childhood, such as whether we respond to conflict with fight, flight, or freeze. This hardwiring can mean we become stuck in our views of others, such as 'my mother never praises me', or 'my boss always undermines me'.

It might feel comfortable to follow what's been hard coded, but, it is possible to change our behavior patterns. To do this, it's important to get out of our comfort zone and challenge our preconceptions, creating space for new roles, at home and at work.

Test, test and test again; build the conflict muscle with repetition

Today's robots have 'evolved', with chatbots learning and changing based on experiences. ChatGPT, launched last year by OpenAI, is a new generation of chatbots that uses conversational artificial intelligence. According to its creators, ChatGPT is programmed to answer "follow-up questions, admit mistakes, challenge incorrect premises, and reject inappropriate requests".

If artificial intelligence can get smarter, so can we. Like AI, we learn from multiple interactions. Developing a conflict skillset needs practice and repetition, just like building a muscle. Micro upskilling – committing short amounts of time to develop a new skill on a regular basis – is a good way to create new habits.

Ctrl-Alt-Del; give yourself a break

Human relationships are complex, and managing conflict is challenging. It's a lifelong journey, even for conflict management specialists, such as mediators and conflict coaches. When facing a difficult conversation, at work or home, it can seem like there is too much to bear in mind: what you say, when to say it, your body language, the other person, active listening, and more, all need to be juggled, and often in the heat of the moment. It can be easy to lose heart and give up, rather like discarding New Year's resolutions.

AI doesn't have this burden, of course. It simply runs a series of routines and learns from success or failure, building its knowledge base. We humans often focus on what was difficult or where we went wrong, making it harder to continue to develop and move forward. A strategy to overcome this is to cut ourselves some slack. We can remind ourselves that it's ok to make mistakes, and then we can try to do it better later. If we pluck up the courage to explain to a colleague how their words were hurtful, and we get overly emotional doing so, it might discourage us from speaking up again. However, we could instead reflect that it was the first time we've spoken up, that we can learn from the experience, and it will be easier next time.

As successful as AI might be in reprogramming itself, there are still many skills that robots don't have that will always be valuable. One such skill is empathy, which is crucial in helping to resolve conflict. Although humans might not be able to run thousands of program tests a minute, we still have the opportunity to learn from the diverse interactions we will have this year with colleagues, friends, and families when the holidays come around again.