

PROFLICT[®]

THE POWER OF POSITIVE CONFLICT

HOW EXTRAORDINARY
INNOVATION, GROWTH AND
TEAMWORK ARE BUILT ON
POSITIVE CONFLICT

STEPHEN STYNES

Contents

1. The Power of Positive Conflict	3
2. The Start-Up to Scale-Up Trap™	4
3. The Valley of Conflict™	7
4. Neuroscience and the 5 Disciplines of Proflict	8
5. Discipline 1 – Pause	10
6. Discipline 2 – Presence	12
7. Discipline 3 – Perspective	14
8. Discipline 4 – Partnering	16
9. Discipline 5 – Possibilities	18
10. Book Launch	20
About the Author	21

The Power of Positive Conflict.

Back in the 1990s, I ran global marketing and communications at a major technology company. As a senior executive, I was fortunate to work with a great team to develop some truly groundbreaking strategies that changed how the company markets and sells products even to this day.

After seven successful years, I left to found a technology marketing consultancy. We developed many innovative campaigns, won global awards for effectiveness and creativity, and the agency was eventually acquired.

Yet throughout these two decades of my career, I observed a consistent pattern that significantly slowed the pace of innovation. The more novel and powerful an idea was, the more pushback it seemed to generate.

I became fascinated by this dynamic, and devoted myself to learning more about what creates this significant block, and how to overcome it.

As a leadership coach and team facilitator I now work with founders, leaders and their teams, supporting them to scale their business at the same time as they scale themselves.

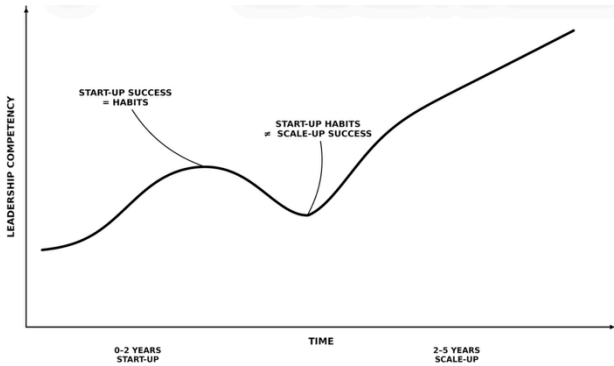
In this work, I see the very same dynamic at play here over and over again. Leaders failing to scale because they fail to handle conflict effectively, and harness it for growth.

Whether you are a founder, a leader or a team member, I'm sure you recognize this dynamic of how conflict can be so disruptive and how we are all so ill prepared for how to use it constructively. This guide will challenge how you view conflict. It will show you why we react the way we do, and how to transform our relationship with conflict to become a powerful force for innovation, growth and relationship building.

The Start-Up to Scale-Up Trap

Being a founder presents many challenges. Some are obvious. Others are hidden. Part of my work at the IESE School of Founders is working with founders to help them identify obstacles to scaling their business. To do that, they first need to focus on scaling themselves.

The biggest hidden obstacle I see consistently is what I have come to call The Start Up to Scale Up Trap.



From the outset founders, especially first-time founders, operate primarily from what I call character-based leadership. Their personality and what that brings is a big part of what gets the company moving in the start-up phase. It can be a domain expertise like sales skills, technology, marketing among others. But it is rarely interpersonal or communication skills.

In corporate environments, this same dynamic occurs when individual contributors move to managerial roles and the role of others takes on a greater importance than your own direct contribution.

As a company grows and moves from start-up to scales-up phase, a founders ' natural style of leadership clashes as new people come on board and the business becomes increasingly complex.

Instead of additional people and resources making the founder's life easier (as many falsely hallucinate), it seems that things are

more difficult. That is because they are. The founder needs to shift from character-based leadership to competency-based leadership. As most founders show up in 360 competency diagnostics as reactive, this starts with re-learning how to deal with conflict.

Why Conflict?

You need new ideas to grow. But new ideas generate friction and that friction has the potential to destroy the very thing you are trying to build. The more ambitious your organisation, the more conflict you generate. Which means the more you need to understand how to harness that conflict productively.

Here's what I've realized: innovation creates conflict. And how most leaders handle conflict contributes to a lot of painful friction, mispent energy, and lost opportunities.

Innovation Creates Conflict. Conflict Kills Innovation.

But it is never actually the presence of conflict that causes failure. It is the inability to harness it intelligently that amplifies every other risk.

Positive conflict in organisations is not only desirable. When it comes to innovation, improvement and growth, conflict is absolutely essential.

Conflict – The Great Unlock

Conflict can in fact be the key to unlocking true creative innovation, and disagreement and tension can be fuel for better work. But not when the response to conflict is to shut it down, ignore it, or blow it up.

The root of the problem for most of us is that we never learned how to work with conflict constructively. Instead we learned to avoid it, suppress it, or fight it. All three responses make our problems worse.

Most individuals and teams have a dysfunctional relationship with conflict. While psychological safety is a must in high-performing teams, what makes a team really work is its ability to navigate conflict productively in situations of stress and uncertainty.

This is more relevant than ever as we enter the age of AI and the tremendous opportunities and threats this technology is bringing.

The companies that thrive in this transition will not be the ones who dominate the technology, but those who manage the change.

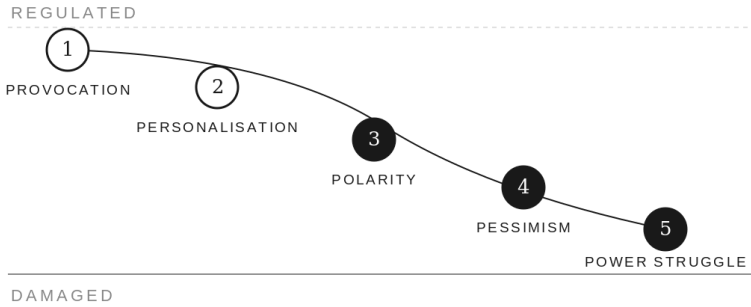
Proflict® – Friction as Fuel

Proflict is the process that addresses exactly this dilemma.

In this book you will learn the key disciplines and practices, to help you harness the power of conflict toward collaborative creativity and true, market-changing innovation.

The Valley of Conflict.

Conflict is a physiological event before it can be a strategic conversation. Five stages of how it unfolds when we let our programming take over.



Almost every conflict badly managed goes through a predictable process of descent into disruption and chaos. This descent is caused by the leader's reactivity—they allow their nervous system to take over, turning every conflict into a threat when it could have been an opportunity for creative collaboration. Here's what it looks like step by step:

01	Provocation	The amygdala flags something as unfair or threatening. Attention narrows from curiosity to defence.
02	Personalisation	The brain links the event to your identity. The conflict becomes about you, not the issue.
03	Polarity	Complexity collapses. Black-and-white thinking. Right vs wrong. Me vs them.
04	Pessimism	Negative future scenarios bias the brain. Trust degrades. Motives are questioned.
05	Power Struggle	Status circuits take over. Winning matters more than understanding. Damage is done.

The result leaves not only issues unresolved, but over time a build-up of negative energy and increasing reluctance to raise issues.

Neuroscience & The 5 Disciplines

Where negative conflict pulls the brain into a rapid threat spiral, Proflict activates the opposite neurological pathway.

Defence is the trigger response to conflict. When we activate these disciplines, starting with pause, the brain shifts from reactivity to regulation, and from survival mode to creative collaboration. There are 5 Disciplines. 3 Inner. 2 Outer. The first three inner game disciplines regulate you. The last two support the conversation and those involved in it.

INNER GAME · AWARENESS

01

PAUSE

Physiological Regulation

Space between stimulus and response.

02

PRESENCE

Attentional Anchoring

Fully here before you engage.

03

PERSPECTIVE

Cognitive Expansion

Beyond your own lens.

OUTER GAME · ACTION

04

PARTNERSHIP

Generative Trust

Trust strong enough for honest disagreement.

05

POSSIBILITIES

Collective Creativity

What emerges from the friction.

Each of the 5 disciplines corresponds to a measurable change in the nervous system.

Proflict is not simply a communication technique. It is a neurological reset that restores the brain's capacity for perspective, creativity and partnership.

Each phase enables the next and requires discipline to enact them. You cannot be present if you don't learn to pause. You cannot truly partner with someone if you are not open to a wider perspective than what you might be holding. The order is the work.



1. Pause

PHYSIOLOGICAL REGULATION

Create a deliberate gap between stimulus and response.

CREATING SPACE

REACTIVE MOVE

Interrupt

RESPONSIVE MOVE

Pause

PROFLICT · FIVE PRINCIPLES · PRINCIPLE 1

1. The Power of Pause

Pause is the deliberate act of creating space between stimulus and response. It interrupts the automatic stress reaction and restores access to clear thinking. It is the gateway skill — without it, none of the other principles are possible.

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- 01 **When you are interrupted.** Simply stop speaking. Allow the silence to surface what just happened. Resume without apology or explanation.
 - 02 **When you are triggered.** Recognise you have a choice. Take one deep breath and count to five. You have just reset your nervous system.
 - 03 **When tension rises.** Slow your pace slightly. Grounded speech always communicates confidence.
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IN PRACTICE

Take a breath, say what needs to be said, then stop.

A pause is not a moment of doing nothing. It is a deliberate act of physiological regulation that restores access to the thinking brain.

IF YOU REMEMBER NOTHING ELSE

Pause is the gateway skill to better leadership.

ASK YOURSELF

What is your relationship with stillness and silence?



2. Presence

ATTENTIONAL ANCHORING

Anchor yourself before you engage.

LEADING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

REACTIVE MOVE

Self-Protect

RESPONSIVE MOVE

Attention

PROFLICT · FIVE PRINCIPLES · PRINCIPLE 2

2. The Power of Presence

Presence is the practice of being fully here, anchored in yourself before you engage with anyone else. When you are present you reduce emotional noise and increase psychological safety.

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- 01 **Before a difficult conversation.** Ground yourself by feeling your feet on the floor, your weight on the chair. Drop your attention from your head down into your body.
 - 02 **During a difficult conversation.** If you feel triggered or the urge to interrupt, notice that. Now notice where this tension is in your body. Focus on relaxing that part of your body instead of speaking out.
 - 03 **After a difficult conversation.** Once you are finished, don't carry the tension with you. Notice what you are holding. If you have an action related to it, take care of it as soon as you can, and then give yourself permission to let it go.

IN PRACTICE

The Invisible Person Test.

In every interaction ask yourself: Am I helping to make this person feel seen by me right now?

IF YOU REMEMBER NOTHING ELSE

The most present person in the room is almost always the most powerful.

ASK YOURSELF

Who in your team this week needed to feel seen and heard by you — and didn't?



3. Perspective

COGNITIVE EXPANSION

Hold your views less tightly.

THE ART OF REFRAMING

REACTIVE MOVE

Defend

RESPONSIVE MOVE

Discover

PROFLICT · FIVE PRINCIPLES · PRINCIPLE 3

3. The Power of Perspective

Perspective is the skill of acting with curiosity. It expands your thinking beyond your own defended position, prevents you from becoming trapped in your own limited view, and allows you to move from opposition to co-creation.

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- 01 **Don't Assume — Ask.** From “I know exactly what’s going on” to “What am I not seeing?”
 - 02 **Don't Narrate — Notice.** From “They’re doing this because...” to “I’m telling myself a story. What are the facts?”
 - 03 **Don't Defend — Discover.** From “Let me explain why I did that” to “What was the impact from your perspective?”
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IN PRACTICE

Before you respond, ask one question.

What might they be seeing that I cannot? Genuinely try to answer it. Then ask them: “What is one thing you wish I understood better about where you are coming from?”

IF YOU REMEMBER NOTHING ELSE

Conflict itself is not the problem. The interpretation of the conflict is what determines the outcome.

ASK YOURSELF

What is the version of this story where you are the problem?



4. Partnership

GENERATIVE TRUST

Trust is strong enough that honest disagreement strengthens the relationship rather than weakens it.

BONDING BEYOND THE AGREEMENT

REACTIVE MOVE

Force

RESPONSIVE MOVE

Frame

PROFLICT · FIVE PRINCIPLES · PRINCIPLE 4

4. The Power of Partnership

Partnership means building trust strong enough that honest disagreement makes the relationship stronger rather than weaker — and generates something neither party could have built alone. The real question is not “Did we resolve the conflict?” It is “Did our partnership get stronger because of it?”

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- 01 **From Interrupt to Pause.** “Let’s slow this down.”
 - 02 **From Defend to Inquire.** “Help me understand your concern.”
 - 03 **From Force to Frame.** “Here’s how I’m seeing it — is there something I might be missing?”

IN PRACTICE

The AIC Method.

Frame every difficult conversation in three steps. Attention: what you want to talk about. Intention: how you want it to end. Consent: their agreement to the conversation.

IF YOU REMEMBER NOTHING ELSE

Partnership isn't measured by how easily you agree, but by how well you disagree.

ASK YOURSELF

Before your next hard conversation: am I protecting my position, or am I supporting this partnership?



5. Possibilities

COLLECTIVE CREATIVITY

What becomes available when the previous four principles have done their work.

UNLOCKING THE CREATIVE ENERGY

REACTIVE MOVE

Resist

RESPONSIVE MOVE

Explore

PROFLICT · FIVE PRINCIPLES · PRINCIPLE 5

5. The Power of Possibilities

Possibilities are what become available when you stop treating tension as the enemy and start treating it as information. It is the fifth principle precisely because it requires all four previous ones to have taken root. You cannot access creative possibilities while still in reactive mode.

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- 01 **Don't Get Furious — Get Curious.** Curiosity activates the prefrontal cortex; anger shuts it down. The two cannot occupy the same moment.
 - 02 **Yes-And, not Yes-But.** “Yes, but...” shuts ideas down. “Yes, and...” builds on them.
 - 03 **Generate before you evaluate.** Get all the ideas down first. Draw a line. Evaluate them later. Judging too early is the fastest way to kill creativity.

IN PRACTICE

Always Answer Asking.

A poor answer raises conflict up. A good question will never let you down. In tension, replace your next answer with a better question.

IF YOU REMEMBER NOTHING ELSE

Disagreement is not dysfunctional. It is intelligence trying to surface.

ASK YOURSELF

What might this tension be trying to create?

Proflict – A Leaders Guide to Positive Conflict

Launch September 2026.

What you have in your hands is a field guide for the practice of learning to leverage the power of positive conflict.

The full book Proflict launches in September 2026. In it you will find:

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- 01 The full 5 Disciplines, with founder stories and the neuroscience behind each.
 - 02 Five seven-day challenges – one per discipline that you can put into practice with your teams.
 - 03 The two planes frame and how each principle applies on the small scale and the company scale.
 - 04 The Proflict Performance Matrix for teams, with the four quadrants and how to move between them.
 - 05 Practices, scripts, and exercises to take into your next hard conversation and more.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen Stynes



Stephen Stynes is the creator of the Proflict methodology. He has spent over twenty years working with founders, executives, and leadership teams across Europe, US and Latin America on the inner and outer game of leading through conflict. He delivers keynotes, runs founder workshops, and coaches one-to-one.

Keynotes	Workshops	Coaching
A 45-minute talk on the 5 Principles for founder events, leadership offsites, and conferences.	Half-day or full-day team workshops to integrate the 5 Ps of Proflict into your team culture.	One-to-one founder coaching to help founders improve their skills at innovation-driven leadership.

GET IN TOUCH

stephen@proflict.com

For speaking, workshops, coaching, or to be notified when the Proflict Academy opens enrolment in 2027.