

# How To “Get Somewhere” In Conflict

**T**here you are, going round and round in this conflict. All you hear is the other person’s opinion. All you can see is your own. The voice in your head says, “This is going nowhere!” Listen to it. It’s giving you a choice:

## Get Mad or Get Curious

If you choose getting mad, you’ve got a lot of company. It comes naturally. You don’t have to think too hard. It feels good in the moment. The trouble with getting mad is, it doesn’t get you anywhere except deeper into conflict.

You can also seize this opportunity of awareness to do something different—to get curious. But when you think about it, “Get curious,” just doesn’t sound right. It doesn’t have a ring to it. “Yeah,” you’re thinking, “Isn’t it, ‘Don’t get mad; get even?’ I could do that.” That would feel satisfying. Besides, as you consider your options, “Get curious,” sounds suspiciously like, “Eat your vegetables.” Even though this second option may seem unpalatable, it’s better than it sounds!

This article discusses why you’d want to be curious, what could possibly inspire your curiosity, and specifically, it shows how to bring the conflict to a just, mutually satisfying resolution.

## Why Be Curious?

Being curious has many rewards.

First, you feel better, physiologically and mentally. When you’re angry, it feels as though your brain and body have been hijacked by your emotions. When you’re curious, you feel calm but alert. When you’re not dominated by your emotions,

you can think clearly and have a sense of perspective. When you’re curious, you can use the creative part of your brain.

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Second, the working relationship becomes stronger, which has tangible effects on work. When one person’s needs are not fully addressed in the solution, it feels like a splinter, only part of which has come out. It throbs as a reminder of what remains hidden deep. Long term, if either person loses the conflict, both people lose—the person who lost is demoralized, demotivated, distrustful, still angry, and/or still stymied. The “losers” of a conflict hold back in their work, rather than give it their all. At their worst, they can poison the work environment with negativity.

When a solution addresses real needs, the conflict, like a clean wound, can heal completely. People are relieved, charged up, and happier with you and in their work. Identifying real needs and meeting them

through mutual problem-solving create a foundation of trust.

The third reward for curiosity is that you get a better resolution to the conflict. When you get mad, you’re not thinking clearly. When you’re curious, the creative part of your brain is actively engaged in problem-solving. Here’s how it works.

## The Problem with Solutions

Solutions are what you need in conflict, but they’re also what get you into trouble. They are the impasse. For example, you’re arguing with a team member about the timetable for a new product release. You want the product released as soon as possible because it will be better for sales; your team member knows the product will be better if there’s extra time allowed.

Here’s how this impasse sounds:

“It’s got to be ready by the beginning of next quarter.”

“Well that’s too bad. It won’t be ready until the end of the next quarter.”

Even if you reflect, you might hit a dead end:

“The earliest you could complete it is March 31<sup>st</sup>.”

“Yes.”

This is going nowhere! When you face this kind of an impasse, you need to take a different route over the mountain. Following real needs is the passage.

Real needs are different than solutions. Every solution is a package that carries the real need. Imagine a crystal vase, wrapped in bubble wrap, nestled in peanuts, sealed up in a cardboard box. The box is the solution; the crystal vase is the real need. You can wrap the vase in many different ways to get it safely to its destination.

In the same way, one need can have many solutions. In the previous example, your real need has to do with sales. Your solution is to improve sales by getting to market faster. Your team member’s need is for product quality. Your team member’s solution is spend more time developing the product. You and your team member have competing solutions, but complementary needs. After all, quality should enhance sales; and sales should fund product improvement. Both of you can win. There are many ways to improve sales, and many ways to support product quality. Once you realize that there are a variety of ways to meet each person’s needs, you are liberated from not only your solution, but from your frustration around seeing the other person as blocking your solution.

Finding a solution that’s based on real needs requires a new perspective. Helpful perspectives are often invisible when you’re stuck on one solution. It’s similar to looking at the well-known illustration that looks like two faces when you focus on the dark shapes and looks like a vase when you focus on the white space between the dark shapes. Until you’re able to see the other image, it seems like it isn’t there. Yet once you see it, it’s obvious and clear.

Sure, you really like your solution. You

don’t want to give it up. But, if you can give it up, you’ll find something even better because the new solution was forged in collaboration, in the heat of mutual creativity, against the anvil of real needs. It will be a stronger solution because you’re holding it with your co-workers, rather than in spite of them.

When it’s time to get beyond an impasse of solutions, it’s time to get curious about real needs: your own needs and the needs of other people. Here’s what to do.

### How to Find Real Needs

Real needs live within any solution that you have or that you hear, yet they aren’t always clear. That’s why curiosity is important. To find real needs, expect to do a little detective work.

#### Take a Step Back

Detectives are observant. They step back from the obvious to see what they can learn. Taking a step back means leaving your anger, annoyance, and irritation behind. When you can step away from your own solution, and from the other person’s solution, you can start to uncover the real needs driving what each of you are saying.

#### Begin with Attending

As you step back to observe and get curious about the person, don’t keep yourself distant. Give this person your full attention. Pay attention to words, emotions, body language, and what goes unspoken. You might hear yourself thinking, “What’s the big deal?” Usually we say that dismissively, meaning, “It shouldn’t be a big deal.” Instead, when you hear yourself thinking, “What’s the big deal?” really ask yourself that question. Even though it doesn’t seem to be important to you, it is important to the other person. Try to understand why.

#### Ask Yourself, “Why?”

If you’ve ever been around a three-year-old, you’ll know that “Why” is a favorite question. They ask, “But why, Daddy, why?” Then you explain why, “Because...” What’s the next question? “But why, Daddy, why?” And you explain in a little more depth, translated into the thinking of a three-year-old, “Because...” The game is only over when you can say, “I don’t know.” While in a three-year-old, this is endearing—at least for a short amount of time—it’s less charming coming from an adult. So try asking yourself why first. As you listen, try to hear the “Why” behind what the person said.

#### Reflect the “Why”

Reflecting is different than what we usually do to other people when we’re in conflict, which is to aim our shotgun of solutions at the problem and see if we hit the target. The problem is that we tend to fire off solutions without having identified the real need. Reflecting will get you to the real need most quickly and accurately. Your reflections can even include your best guess of “why” in them.

- “You’re concerned about releasing the product too early because ensuring quality is a key part of your job.”
- “You’re frustrated about rushing to market because quality problems create customer dissatisfaction down the road.”
- “You dread being set up for customer problems because they suck up a lot of your time. That keeps you from moving ahead on other objectives.”

If you’re on the right track, the other person will go a little deeper: “Yeah, because...” Then start listening to the “Why” behind this next train of thought. Even if

you’re not on the right track, you’ll probably get the deeper information you need. “No, it’s not that,” the person will say, “the issue is really...” Listen to that.

Other questions that get to the “Why,” are:

- “What are they afraid might happen if they don’t get \_\_\_\_\_?”
- “If they didn’t get what they want (their solution), could they still get what they need?”
- “What are they hoping to get through their solution?”

### Ask Out Loud, If You Need To

If you’re really baffled about why something is so important to the other person, then ask. It’s better to discover real needs through reflecting than through questioning, because reflecting really allows you to follow the person’s train of thinking. Questioning tends to put you in charge of the conversation. Since you don’t know the other person’s real needs, your questions could lead the person far away from the needs you’re trying to find. People will lead you to their needs if you can follow their train of thinking, by listening.

But if you’re lost, ask a question. If you do this judgmentally or analytically, you’ll annoy the other person. Do it neutrally or empathically; position your question with a reflection. This assures the other person that you have indeed been paying attention. “It sounds like ... is really important to you. Help me understand what is at stake for you.” After the person explains, reflect rather than immediately follow up with more questions.

### Getting the “Yes”

When you reflect accurately, the person will acknowledge that by saying some form of “yes.” It may sound many different ways: “Exactly.” “Unh hunh.” “Right.”

“Yeah.” If they keep having more to say, you keep reflecting. If they don’t, it’s your turn to talk.

### “Now, what was I saying?” — Finding Your Own Real Needs

The great thing about getting curious instead of getting mad is that it frees you up from being overly attached to your own solution. When it’s your turn to talk, you’ll find yourself casting off your solution and articulating what you need. You’ll use the same inquisitive approach with your own needs (“Hey, what do I need?”), and then say why. For example, “The time frame is important to me because I’m afraid we’ll lose customers with a late product launch. I want to keep our customers and have a chance to build market share.” See, now you’re talking about what’s most important. The deadline was a means to this end.

### Summarizing Real Needs

After you’ve spoken briefly and clearly about your real needs, you can expect to hear back from the other person. When you do, the needs will unfold. When you think you’re at the point of clarity, summarize what you hear and what you know. It might sound like this: “You need \_\_\_\_\_ and I need \_\_\_\_\_.”

To return to the original example: “You need to make sure that customer complaints don’t eat into the time you have to work on new products, and I need to ensure customer loyalty and market share.” Interesting: you both want satisfied customers. From that summary of needs, the sky’s the limit. You can have many different solutions. For example, the two of you could work together on a plan to build customer loyalty and satisfaction. Now you’re getting somewhere!

### Conclusion

At the moment when you’re saying to yourself, “This is going nowhere!” you will always have the choice to get mad or to get curious. Getting mad will only make things worse. Getting curious gets you places. It gives you passage, through real needs, to a truly viable solution.

### Post Script: “Why Do I Always Have to Be the Skill User?”

Does it seem like you’re always the one who has to listen? If you’re starting to feel resentful or self-righteous about your using the skills, bring it up or let it go. Don’t let it fester and become moral high ground, because it will leak into your interactions and will poison your reflecting.

There are a lot of reasons to let it go. You’re using the skills in service of a greater goal which will meet your needs. Plus, when you use the skills, you’ve got fewer stress-induced hormones circulating in your body, so you actually feel better than the angry person you’re working things out with. Further, you get to be the hero, (even if it’s just in your own mind), for taking the needed step to improve a bad situation.

If you need to bring it up, don’t bring it up in the middle of the conflict. Set aside a separate time, and prepare for the discussion. You should expect to hear a lot of defensiveness, and to listen a lot. (“But that’s what I was trying to avoid!” Exactly. That’s human nature for you.)

“I’ll do it my... way.”

A great song, it’s a poor motto in conflict resolution. Yet, that’s how most of us get into conflict in the first place. We each want to do it our own way.

Why are we so stubborn? Well, there’s

a reason we want to do things a certain way. The way we do it meets our needs. The way they want to do it, doesn't. That's how conflict is born.

Behind every conflict are real needs waiting to be addressed.

Getting mad doesn't get you anywhere. It might feel good in the moment, but it doesn't

Here's why: you are not interested in hearing what the other person has to say. In fact, whenever you hear that person talk about this issue, you stop hearing them. All you can hear are the voices of opposition in your head. But if you've been able to manage your emotions (see "Just Do It, Dealing with Emotions in Conflict"), you've already done the hardest part.

In talking you get clearer about your own needs. When you're angry, you can be very articulate about your *solution*, but not your needs. You're protecting your real needs but you're unable to state them clearly. When you're curious about the other person, you'll also find yourself able to sift through your thoughts and emotions (either out loud or inside yourself). You can cast off your solution in order to search for your real needs.

In the process of listening to another person's real needs, you're also identifying your own real needs. First, you need to let go of your solution. Let the clarity of the other person's needs shed new light on your own. The paradigm shift that's happening with the other person (from solution to need) will create a paradigm shift in your own thinking