

**Beth Yohe:** So, if I rewrite the story of every person who comes into the, my business without a mask, simply forgot, I'm much more likely to be, hey, that's all right. Here's a disposable mask that you can use, versus if I write the story, um, this person is making my life difficult, they don't care about other people, and they're going to make them sick, right? Then my, my attitude is very different and can come out of anger or fear.

**Sam Fuqua:** That's Beth Yohe talking about one of the practical strategies for everyday conflicts. That's our topic on this edition of Well, That Went Sideways! We're a podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful, and non-violent communication. We present ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. Our guest today is Beth Yohe, Executive Director of The Conflict Center in Denver. The Conflict Center is our partner in these podcasts. Welcome Beth.

**Beth Yohe:** Thank you for having me. Um, it's a pleasure to be here with you all and to chat a little.

**Sam Fuqua:** I'm Sam Fuqua, co-host of the program with Jes Rau. Hi, Jes.

**Jes Rau:** Hey there.

**Sam Fuqua:** Beth Yohe, The Conflict Center often uses the phrase *transform conflict* rather than resolve conflict. Why is that?

**Beth Yohe:** The Conflict Center really is grounded in this idea that conflict can be an opportunity, um, to build relationships and solve problems. And we do that, um, with the mission of equipping people with the practical skills to navigate, transform and embrace everyday conflict. So, we're talking about the conflict that we all face all the time, um, in our day-to-day lives. And our founder, Liz Loecher, started The Conflict Center in 1987. So, we've been around for over 30 years, and, um, she really had this clear vision of calling it The Conflict Center, to put that concept of conflict right out there and say, to say, we don't have to see conflict as a negative. It's a thing that happens to all of us. And, um, with the right tools and skills and maybe a shift, kind of reframe in our perspective, conflict can be an opportunity for all sorts of things.

**Sam Fuqua:** How can individuals make that shift when we've spent our lives thinking of conflict in a more negative way?

**Beth Yohe:** Well, part of it is, um, I mean most of us have not grown up with this idea that conflict can be positive, right? Most of us, um, have learned that conflict is either something to avoid or it's a negative. So, um, part of it is just sitting with, you know, why do I feel that way about conflict? What is it that makes me uncomfortable about conflict? And starting from there, I think it's one piece just, uh, in our own brains rethinking how we view conflict. And the other piece is often we have had, we truly have had negative experience with conflict because we also aren't usually taught the skills and the tools to be able to address conflict in more positive and productive ways. So, I think it's a, both, uh, internal, how am I viewing conflict, and then also the external of what are the skills that I need to learn? What are the tools that I can use to have a different experience with conflict?

**Sam Fuqua:** Does judgment play a role in how we handle conflicts?

**Beth**

**Yohe:** I think so. Judgment is certainly a piece of what happens when we, um, find ourselves in conflict or find ourselves first in some way, um, we can use the word “triggered” or buttons are pushed, right, often comes out of a place of judgment or assumptions that we make, for sure. And then I think, uh, that conflict also often has to do with different perspectives or misunderstanding of something that happened, and judgment is certainly a part of that as well, um, where we make some assumptions about what the other person is thinking or why they did something, um, and then react, uh, based on that judgment or assumption.

**Sam Fuqua:** We're recording this conversation in late June, about four months into the pandemic, and one common area of conflict we're seeing is around mask behavior. Some people are wearing them, others aren't, depending on the situation, and we judge people by their behavior, which can become verbal conflict if it's face-to-face or online conflict on social media where people are talking about not wearing masks or wearing masks. Is that a relevant current example of what you're talking about with regard to judgment and conflict?

**Beth Yohe:** Yes, yes. And, for sure. And we've, um, at The Conflict Center, actually been doing some training for customer facing, um, or companies and things, and dealing with this exact issue, right? Um, compliance, if, if there's an ordinance requiring masks or a business that requires it and, and how that plays out. Um, and we definitely see a lot of reactions, as you mentioned. It can be, um, through social media or just, um, personal conversations where there's a lot of assumptions that we make about whether what someone who wears a mask or doesn't is, is saying, if you will, communicating, um, with that choice. And so depending on how our perspective on wearing masks, we definitely add that piece in. So, if you are not wearing a mask, then we might make assumptions about, um, your politics or how much you care, that you don't care about other people, uh, and those sorts of things. And so, one of the things is to, to think about what is our goal, right? So, for those folks that are customer facing, uh, they, they may have a goal of each person who comes into the store has to wear a mask because it's required. Um, and so getting into a, a big thing of making a judgment about why the person came in without a mask isn't going to accomplish their needs. In order for me to serve you, you need to wear a mask, right? And so in those cases, setting aside sort of the judgment or assumptions that we make about that person, and instead just focusing on this is what needs to happen in order for you to be in this store, can be really helpful, right?

So, not going down the rabbit hole of getting into an argument with the person, um, or being hostile with the person because we made the assumption that they don't care about other people 'cause they're not wearing a mask. But instead, instead just either being neutral to the situation or even writing a different story in our head. So, part of the one, part of the thing that we can do around judgment is catch ourselves, um, 'cause we often, the judgment is a story that we've created, right? We've written the story about this other person, and we can, when we can catch ourselves doing that, we can rewrite the story. So, if I rewrite the story of every person who comes into the, my business without a mask, simply forgot, right? That's a much, I'm much more likely to be, hey, that's all right. Here's a disposable mask that you can use, versus if I write the story, um, this person is making my life difficult, they don't care about other people and they're going to make them sick, right? Then my, my attitude is very different and can be, um, come out of anger or fear and those kinds of things. I would say part, whether it's masks or something else, part of what we can do is catch the story that we've written and rewrite a story if we need to in order to have a more positive interaction. And, I know some people listening to this might be, say, but there are those people who, they don't care or they are not wearing a mask for a political statement or what have you. And that's in terms of addressing our motivation. That's less useful, right? Um, worrying about whether you're right or not, um,

doesn't

get to the issue of what do I need to have happen here, um, in order to go about our business, if that makes sense.

**Jes Rau:** Uh, yeah. And I was wondering, as you were talking about that, like such a valuable skill to be able to reframe as, as one of the tools that we can use, what are other tools that people can work on for those everyday conflicts, um, besides reframing?

**Beth Yohe:** Um, great question. Um, there's certainly a number of tools, um, along the lines of reframing. Um, we can also, it's connected, be aware of the other thoughts that come into our heads, right? So, we often should or ought other people, like they should know better, they should, um, know what I want. They should have cleaned the dishes, right? Especially if it's interpersonal, like at home kinds of things. We often should other people, um, and have those kind of recurring messages in our own mind, uh, that go through. And so another tool is catching ourselves when we do that, right? Um, when we catch ourselves doing the shoulds and the oughts, stopping and saying, okay, what is it that I need accomplished and how can I express that, um, to this other person? So, that's one tool that I think is related. Another tool that I find particularly helpful is, uh, this idea of understanding the context of a situation before the content. And so what I mean by that is we often respond to content first, um, without checking the context. So, if you think about email communication or written communication, um, we might get something in the, in an email from a colleague or a supervisor and assume tone, right? Um, and then get frustrated or angrier or have a reaction, right? Why is this person being rude, or why is this person being angry, when all we've done is read an email? So, we have the content and we assume the context.

Um, and if we can stop ourselves and say, well, why do I think this person is angry? Um, why do I think this person is being rude? And check that context and follow up, hey, I got your, I got your message. It seemed like you might be frustrated. Am I right? Or, can we talk about this? Right? Is a very different response. The same, um, holds true in situations like when you're driving and someone cuts you off, right? Oft, the content is someone cut you off. The context we often create, and it's almost always negative, right? That person is a jerk. Um, they, I bet they were texting. Um, they don't care about other people on the road. Those kinds of things. And in that situation, we won't ever be able to check the context of what happened. Um, but by having, um, assuming a negative context, we actually only hurt ourselves, right? Like when I do that, I get, I find myself getting angry and my heart races and all of these things. And if I decide to create a different context and say, you know, I bet it's been a long day, they just didn't see me. I can slow down and give them room. That, that benefits me. It calms me down. So, those are two things off the bat that I can think of that are all kind of related to this idea of rewriting the story, but in specific ways.

**Sam Fuqua:** Someone I know says that when they get cut off in traffic, they control their reaction by telling themselves that person is driving to their enlightenment.

**Beth Yohe:** Oh!

**Jes Rau:** That's great.

**Sam Fuqua:** Which is another way to reframe the story we tell ourselves in that moment.

**Beth Yohe:** I, oh yeah. I love that. I'm gonna add that to my... Yeah, 'cause that makes me think of another tool with, is, um, our own cooling off thoughts and positive thoughts that go through our own head, right?

So, that could be one of them, right? Something happens in traffic and it's, that person is driving to their own enlightenment, right? And just saying that for yourselves. There're others that are maybe a little bit more common, right? Like, you're in a difficult situation. Someone's being, um, rude to you or, or combative in a, in a workplace sit, setting. You know, having something like this, this isn't permanent, I can get through this, um, they're looking for a reaction, so I won't give them one. Like, whatever it is that works for you, but finding a couple of phrases that you can say in your own head that helps just regulate your, yourself so that you don't respond and match energy and don't escalate the situation. So, those cooling off thoughts can be, um, really helpful, um, whether they're slightly humorous or just ways to remind yourself that you can get through a situation.

**Sam Fuqua:** Sometimes I find that when I'm trying to calm down internally, it's really just compartmentalizing this difficult exchange so I don't have to deal with it. It's avoiding the conflict.

**Beth Yohe:** Yeah, I think that's a really good point, Sam. So the cooling off thoughts that, the purpose isn't to, I'm gonna cool off so much that I'm just completely disengaging. Um, the cooling off thoughts are, I'm gonna do this internally so that I can be in a better place to, to, um, respond to this person in an even tone, um, to try to help bring the situation down, right? So, one that I use often is, I have a teenage, teenager in the house, um, and so sometimes when th, things are happening, I just keep reminding myself, you know, it's hormones, she can't help it. She's a teenager. This is developmental, right? And if I do that, then I don't respond in anger or I don't take it personally. Um, I can calm myself down and then be able to approach it, and it's like, it seems like you're really upset. Why don't we both take a moment just to cool off or, you know, I can see that you're really getting frustrated about this situation and, and I want to hear more about how you're feeling, right? Um, those kinds of things. So, the cooling off thoughts are a step, the first step, and then being able to address the situation, um, differently.

**Jes Rau:** As you were talking about that, I also was reminded, I work with youth as well, and one of the things that I, um, hear most often from youth and from adults is, okay, great, I'll suspend my judgment, I'll cool down, I'll do all of this internal work. But if they, if the other person, isn't going to do those things, then I'm not gonna do those things. It becomes kind of a, um, or I'm tired of doing that when no one else does that for me, when no one else works on that for, for me, and I don't feel like I'm getting that reciprocated. Um, do you work with that at all? Or, how do you support people when they're in that head space?

**Beth Yohe:** Yeah, absolutely. I totally, you know, empathize with that. Um, because the reality is with all of these tools, um, every tool that we can use, and mo, is mostly related to our own reaction to conflict, right? Because the reality is, um, we don't have the ability, typically, to control other people's reactions, right? We can only, um, choose how we're going to respond, and that can be really frustrating. And so, a couple of thoughts come to mind. One, is to be really clear about what our intention or motivation is in our response, right? So sometimes we pick up these skills or we try these skills with the intention or motivation to change someone else's behavior, right? Or, if I do this, then I can make them do X, right? And whenever we approach something with the intention that we are going to change someone else's behavior, perspective, beliefs, whatever it is, we're usually like 99 percent of the time going to be really disappointed, um, and frustrated. And so, we're setting ourselves up for, for that, right? So, one, is to be really aware of, I'm not doing this for them, I'm doing this for me, right? Um, because I want to engage differently, um, and try to have a, a better experience, number one.

Number

two, um, to your point of I'm the only one who does this, right? I think that's a point that, that you can have more conversation about. Not in the moment though, right? So, in the moment of conflict, that's not the place to be like, uh, look how I'm showing up and you're not doing it too. You're modeling, um, instead so that later when things have calmed down, there is a place to have that conversation. Say, hey, you know, I really have been trying to engage with you differently so that we, um, can have a different relationship or we can work through problems more effectively. Um, this is my, my goal is to have a better relationship with you or whatever it is. Um, and here's how it feels when I'm, feel like I'm trying really hard, and, and you're not showing up in the same way. And be able to do that when people are calm and to talk with specific behaviors, right? Like, I'm trying to do this. Um, what do you see and what do you experience? 'Cause sometimes we think we're better at it than we are. So, that's the other piece too, is to get that feedback and to work together to gain those skills.

**Sam Fuqua:** Is there ever a point where the work is done when we feel like we have mastered how we handle conflict?

**Beth Yohe:** I would just say that all of it's a journey, right? And all of it takes practice and, um, sometimes skills are gonna work better for us than others, and that's okay. Um, and there's always, um, another opportunity to practice and to get better at engaging in conflict differently.

**Sam Fuqua:** Beth Yohe is Executive Director of The Conflict Center, a Denver-based nonprofit that provides practical skills and training for addressing everyday conflicts. You can find out more at [conflictcenter.org](http://conflictcenter.org).

Our podcast is called Well, That Went Sideways! We produce new episodes twice a month. You can find them wherever you get your podcasts, and on our website, [sidewayspod.org](http://sidewayspod.org). We also have information on our guests and links to more conflict resolution resources at the website. That's [sidewayspod.org](http://sidewayspod.org). Our program is produced by Mary Zinn, Jes Rau, and me, Sam Fuqua. Our theme is by Mike Stewart. Please help us spread the word about this program, and we hope you can join us next time on Well, That Went Sideways!