

Conflict resolution made simple

By [Nigel Bailey](#), issued by [Red & Yellow](#)

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It's natural to use conversation to try and convince others that our opinion is correct and theirs is wrong. But how do we actually deal with conflict situations?



Conflict is inevitable! People have different opinions.

But it's natural to use conversation to try and convince others that our opinion is correct and theirs is wrong. These conversations can start polite and respectful, but end badly; with disagreement, negative emotions, the effects of which can drag on way beyond the conversation itself.

It's damage-control time - the relationship is in temporary tatters. The good news is that it does not have to be this way.

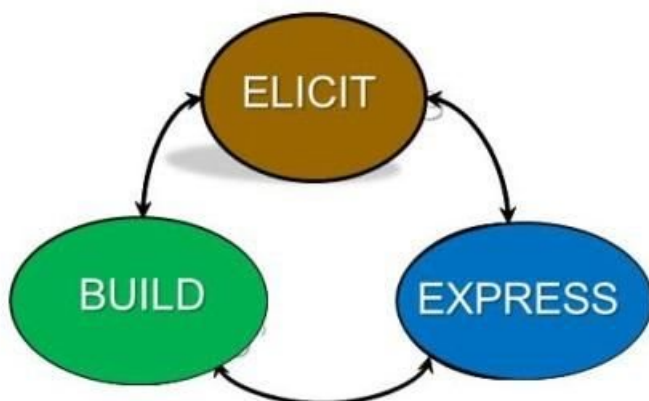
In his book, *Blink*, author and journalist, Malcolm Gladwell tells us about psychology professor John Gottman who can do an amazing thing. By watching and analysing a husband and wife interacting for an hour he can predict, with 95% accuracy, if they will still be married 15 years later. From observing thousands of couples over the years, Gottman has established the characteristics and behaviours of the conversations that occur in good and bad relationships.

A key learning from Gottman's work that we can use to our advantage is this:

The quality of a relationship between people is affected big time by the quality of their conversations - particularly when they disagree about something.

It's natural for us to talk and disagree with our partners, colleagues, friends, family and anyone else but how we do this will determine the state of our relationship after a discussion. Think of your last argument, when it ended, was your relationship with that person stronger, the same or weaker than before? It would be stronger or at least the same if both of you felt you had been treated with respect during the disagreement, and weaker if one or both of you felt disrespected, e.g. "He wasn't listening to me"; "she didn't give me a chance to give my side".

In the Red & Yellow "[Art of Management](#)" programme, the delegates learn a simple but powerful tool to have a quality conversation. By using the tool you will reduce conflict and strengthen your relationships with other people when talking to them. The tool works everywhere - at work, home, in the pub, taxi ... everywhere.



This is how it works: there are 3 components that make up a good quality conversation. The "elicit" component entails you listening and questioning the person who wants to give you an opinion, to make sure you clearly understand their point of view.

Once the person has had their say and you understand their position, you move to the next component which is "express". It's now your turn to give your point of view as clearly as possible. Your conversation partner should now be eliciting - listening to and questioning you.

In a good quality conversation, the parties move between expressing and eliciting until they both clearly understand the other's point of view. Then they move to the final component - "build". This involves finding the common ground and agreeing on common points. You can also agree to disagree - that's okay as long as it is done after expressing and eliciting i.e. in a respectful way.

Think of a relationship you have with someone close to you which is not going well. Specifically, think about your last disagreement/argument with that person. All chances are that elicit, express or build was missing from the conversation. Maybe you didn't get a chance to give your point of view (i.e. express) because they kept on butting in or you did not elicit (i.e. listen) when they were giving their point of view. The argument most likely didn't end well because maybe build was skipped, i.e. one of you walked off in a huff saying, "it's no use talking to you!".

How do you fix the situation and strengthen the relationship?

Plan and talk to that person using the elicit - express - build approach. Listen carefully to them, speak clearly, ask them questions, clarify what you agree and disagree on, and don't butt in when they are talking.

A delegate on the Red & Yellow "[Art of Management](#)" programme recently told me with excitement how she had used the elicit - express - build tool in a conversation with her spouse the previous evening and it ended much better than these conversations normally do. In fact, she found the tool so effective that she taught her spouse how to use it.

The elicit - express - build conversation tool works, no question.



About the author

Nigel facilitates management and leadership training in Africa in a wide variety of industries. He has a Bachelor of Social Science Honours degree, a Post Graduate Diploma in labour law and over 25 years' experience in business management and people development. He is also one of our incredible Knowledge Partners on the Art of Management and High-Performance Management programmes we run for corporates.

When not working, Nigel and his wife, Ann, enjoy hitting the gravel roads of the Western Cape and beyond on a Kawasaki KLR650.

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