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Have a Nice Conflict

— A FABLE —



How to Find
Success and Satisfaction
in the Most Unlikely Places

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“With many of the latest popular business books, I fail to make the link from theory to the practical application of their contents, but because of the storybook format and application to relationships beyond business, the link from theoretical to practical in *Have a Nice Conflict* was obvious. Once I began seeing myself in the behaviors of one of the main characters, I couldn’t put it down. *Have a Nice Conflict* heightened my understanding of Relationship Awareness Theory and kindled a desire to learn more!”

—**Jonathan McGrael**, director, training and development, Arbor Pharmaceuticals

“A gem! This book is packed with secrets for resolving conflict and attaining success. Read it now!”

—**Mike Song**, coauthor, *The Hamster Revolution: Manage Your Email Before It Manages You*

“Turning conflict into opportunity is a blend of skill and art best not left to learning by trial and costly error. The authors brilliantly take you through John Doyle’s personal and professional journey. I found myself putting the insights to use the same day I read the book!”

—**Ron Campbell**, president, Center for Leadership Studies, Situational Leadership

“The best learning comes from stories, and you will not want to put this story down. The book is well written and full of good wit, with memorable Relationship Awareness Theory throughout.”

—**Susan M. Hahn**, president, Swan Consulting Group, Inc.

“Have a Nice Conflict is the perfect resource to use in working with student groups, faculty, and staff. The authors weave the theory and its practical application in a wonderful and humorous story. As the student disciplinary officer of the college, I find it also a helpful tool in mediating conflict to a successful outcome for all parties involved.”

—**Nikki Schaper**, associate dean, student services, MiraCosta College

“This engaging book wonderfully illustrates skills that will help you turn the conflicts of your daily life into seeds of positive change — and it shows you how to do it!”

—**Tony LoRe**, CEO, founder, Youth Mentoring Connection/
Urban Oasis

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Published by Jossey-Bass

A Wiley Imprint

One Montgomery Street, Suite 1200, San Francisco, CA 94104-4594

www.josseybass.com

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Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-118-20276-0 (cloth); ISBN 978-1-118-21927-0 (ebk);

ISBN 978-1-118-21937-9 (ebk); ISBN 978-1-118-21939-3 (ebk)

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

HB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Personal Strengths Publishing, Inc., is based in Carlsbad, California, and serves customers through a global network of interrelated distributors who offer products and services consistent with the ideas in this book in three main categories:

1. Training and development services: direct training for teams and individuals
2. Train the trainer services: Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI) certification, co-facilitation, and curriculum design
3. SDI and related products: self-assessments, workplace learning tools, books, video, and other paper and electronic resources. The SDI is available in over twenty languages.

About the Authors

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INTRODUCTION

IN THE STORY that follows, we explore the practical ideas of relationship awareness theory. Although this tale is pure fiction, the situations were inspired by our real-world experiences in personal and organizational development — and life in general.

We hope that this book will make accessible to you some of the principles of managing conflict effectively. And when we say *effective*, we mean in ways that not only resolve the problem but also strengthen the relationships of the people involved. We further hope that you will discover a new understanding of people and learn new techniques that can reduce the amount of conflict you experience in your life.

Much of this story focuses on the workplace. But as you will soon see, the principles of conflict management explored here apply to the entire spectrum of your relationships — personal and professional.

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Relationship awareness theory was developed over forty years ago and is being applied in some of the world's largest organizations. Those who are familiar with the theory (and the tools based on it) may enjoy referring to the material that follows the story where we have provided the motivational value systems and conflict sequences of our characters. And if you are not familiar with the theory, don't worry. That's about to change.

Thank you for reading this book. We trust you will find something useful on this journey—something that will help make your next conflict a nice one.

CHAPTER

ONE

AT EXACTLY 3:07 in the afternoon, John Doyle concluded that this was the worst day of his career. He could barely feel his feet hitting the floor as he retreated to his office, which now felt like a hundred grueling miles from Human Resources. As he made his way back through the bustling office building, the HR manager's words repeated in his head until they lost all form and meaning. From her first words, he knew what she was going to say. He could see it in her face as she rattled off the obligatory pleasantries. It felt like an eternity before she got around to the point, and it was all he could do not to walk out in the middle of it. Yet somehow he sat there, on the edge of his seat, praying he was wrong.

Finally, her face took on a tortured look he was sure she had practiced in the mirror beforehand. "I'm sorry, John. You were not selected for promotion at this time." The words that followed may as well have been in Swahili. They bounced off him and littered the floor. Her weak offers of

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constructive feedback were drowned out by the tornado raging in John's head — thoughts of panic, embarrassment, exhaustion, and anger swirled with ferocious intensity.

Now he was walking through the crowded bullpen of the sales department, his face burning, his limbs tingling. Did they know? Were they staring? The infamous grapevine of Starr Industries was quite clear on the matter. Although not an official policy, John knew that there was a three-strikes rule in the company: get passed over for promotion three times, and you might as well start looking for another job. You were damaged goods as far as senior management was concerned. John had just sat through his second strike. If he could bring himself to look around, he was sure he'd recognize the looks on his coworkers' faces. They were watching a man whose career was racing toward a brick wall.

"How did it go?" The mere sound of Cassie's voice made John nauseous.

Without even a glance at his sales assistant, he passed her desk and closed himself in his office. He hated that Cassie knew his schedule. Granted, it was her job to know, but now he just wanted to be anonymous — and anywhere but here. He wanted today to have been a bad dream. He was anxious to wake up, wipe the sweat from his brow, and turn over.

But he was very much awake. His visit to HR was only the most recent gut punch in a day full of them. John

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collapsed in his chair and stared at the wall. It wasn't lost on him that a promotion to regional sales manager would surely have meant an office with a window. For now, he had a wall. For light, he had the cheap fluorescent tubes humming above him. He hated mediocrity and now felt bathed in it—confined by it in his poorly lit, windowless office—all of it seeming to pour salt on his wounds.

He had always been proud of his life's trajectory, his steady rise through the ranks. Working constantly and driving hard for results had been his standard approach since college, and up until recently, it seemed to be working. No one had ever questioned John's commitment to the job or even his ability to deliver results, but now that didn't seem to be enough. Somewhere along the way, he'd been derailed. He just couldn't seem to break through this last barrier—he didn't even know what it was—that was preventing him from moving up. What was he doing wrong?

As the clock closed in on four, he thought of his family. How could he face them? In a few hours, he would have no choice. It was J.J.'s first home game that night, and Nancy would have made sure that everyone would be taken care of. The home of Saint Nancy—as he jokingly called her—was a warm sanctuary where no child or husband was without proper nutrition and clean socks. He knew she would take the bad news with cheery, uplifting words of support, but it made him no more eager to admit his failure. Being late to the game? This is what made John most nervous. He

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was sickened by the irony that his drive for success at Starr Industries had taken an obvious toll on his family. And he knew Nancy well enough to know that Saint Nancy could quickly become Mt. Saint Helens when John fell short as an active participant in the family.

Looking down at the papers on his desk, he was jolted out of his thoughts. Round one of the day's lopsided boxing bout had begun with a sucker-punch the second he entered his office. A single piece of paper lay neatly on his keyboard—a faxed copy of Holly Styles's letter of resignation. John had felt the wind knocked out of him after reading only half a sentence.

Holly was John's top-performing sales representative for three years running and an informal leader of the team. John prayed that Holly had found a job in an unrelated industry, but he immediately began to worry that she had been lured away by a competitor. He began to calculate just how many customers might follow Holly to her new company and how hard it would be to find another salesperson with Holly's skill and ability to build relationships with clients. More than anything else, John worried about how her departure would look in the eyes of senior management—especially since this was the second superstar John had lost in as many months.

John checked his desk phone. The voice mail indicator remained dark. Why hadn't Holly returned his calls? Throughout the day, he had left messages on her cell phone,

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he doing about Holly's top five accounts? None of his answers seemed good enough for Gail, and the twenty-minute conversation felt more like two hours.

It was round four with the HR manager that most left him reeling. His career aspirations were slipping through his fingers. Everything he had been working so hard for all these years and the toll it had taken on his family and his friendships now seemed wasted.

He found himself pacing his office when the bell rang for round five. It was the alert chime from his e-mail. He prayed it was spam. On a day like today, black market pharmaceuticals and shady investment advice would be a welcome change of pace. John clicked on the e-mail icon on his computer and discovered several new messages. One subject line caught his eye: EXIT INTERVIEW RESULTS.

Opening the message, he could see the report was for Andy Ward, the sales rep he had lost about six weeks ago. His HR representative was required to pass along feedback received during Andy's exit interview. John felt ill as he read the results: "I liked the company, and I liked the work, but I didn't like working for John. He didn't make me feel like I was part of a team. It always felt like a competition. I hate to say this, but John Doyle was the main reason I started looking for another job."

John burned with feelings of betrayal. Andy had fabricated some excuse about wanting to start his own business,

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and the whole departure had been very upbeat and civilized. John had even offered to serve as a reference for him. Now he knew the truth, and he wasn't the only one. Surely this report was contributing to John's ever-diminishing career prospects. The pounding of John's heart seemed to shake his whole body.

There was a timid knock on his door that he knew to be Cassie's. John closed out of his e-mail program and tried to compose himself. "What?"

Cassie poked her head in. "May I?"

John waved an arm, motioning her in.

"Sorry to bug you. It's just—I didn't know if you wanted me to do anything," said Cassie.

"About what?" John had been assaulted from so many fronts; he couldn't imagine what she was talking about.

"About Holly," she said. "A few clients have called. I'm not quite sure what I should be telling them."

Something inside John snapped into place. A surge of adrenaline seemed to seize him, dragging his body from the dark caverns of his mind. It was time for action. If he was going to survive this day, he'd have to step up and start swinging.

"Route her calls to me," he said. "In the meantime, I need you to print me a list of her clients with contact information and annual sales."

He grabbed the phone and began to dial.

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“Year-to-date?” she asked as she made her way to the door. But he had already turned away. With a roll of her eyes, Cassie left him alone.

“Hi. Walter Freeman, please,” he said into the phone. “Yes, John Doyle.”

John’s knee began to bounce rapidly, as he was put on hold. Walter Freeman was John’s oldest customer and his biggest. John had landed the account as a hungry, naive young kid, right out of college. Walter had relented to John’s persistence, mostly because he was entertained by him — impressed by what he called John’s “gumption.” In the years that followed, Walter had become something of a mentor and friend. John was a frequent guest at business parties, and Walter had even invited Nancy and him to join him for an overnight cruise on his yacht. But that was years ago. John’s rise to sales manager left little time for account management, so he placed Walter’s business in the capable hands of his brightest salesman. But six weeks earlier, John had been forced to explain to Walter why Andy would no longer be representing his account. And as luck would have it, Holly had been Andy’s replacement. It was time for major damage control.

The other line was answered by Walter’s assistant. “Walter Freeman’s office.”

“Hi, Florence. It’s John Doyle. Can I speak to Walter?”

“I’m afraid not. He’s in a meeting.”

“Do you know when he’ll be out?”

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“Four thirty, but he won’t be able to call you back. He’s jumping straight into a taxi to make a six thirty to Chicago.”

John placed the receiver to his forehead, squinting in frustration.

“I can leave him a message,” she offered apologetically.

John looked at his watch and hung up the phone without leaving a message. He haphazardly tossed the array of papers from his desk into his briefcase and launched from his chair.

* * *

John drummed the steering wheel of his aging BMW. There was no music, only the endless monologue of his thoughts, drowning out the muffled noise of the city streets surrounding his parked car. The downtown headquarters of Freeman-Davis Group occupied a building that stretched well above John’s line of sight. In his parking spot near the main entrance, he began to wonder if this was what a stalker felt like—an uneasy fusion of adrenaline and boredom.

He debated how Walter might interpret his unannounced appearance. In the end, though, John figured it was this kind of assertiveness that cemented their personal and professional relationship in the first place. And the fact was that John couldn’t afford to lose Walter’s business.

Finally, he saw the old man push through the front doors. Walter had to be seventy years old by now, but he still exuded that special something that made people look