

The 3rd Alternative

Stephen Covey provides a direct approach to successful problem solving in his recent book, "The 3rd Alternative – Solving Life's Most Difficult Problems." His 3rd Alternative approach engages everyone involved in an issue to advance the agenda in a winning way. The soft stuff will always be the hard stuff, but leveraging 3rd Alternative thinking can make the soft stuff significantly easier to resolve productively.

Most people involved in conflict resolution treat a conflict as a transaction. It's about dividing up the pie. You can either accommodate or confront your opponent. You can give away the pie or you can fight over it, and there are techniques and tricks to gain an advantage. But after dividing it — in the end, it's the same pie.

By contrast, Covey offers the 3rd Alternative to transform a conflict situation. He suggests that it's about making a new pie that's bigger and better. Where most conflict resolution is transactional, the 3rd Alternative is transformational.

If you find yourself caught up in a conflict at work, you must avoid falling automatically into a defensive mindset. The natural, unthinking response to a challenge is to fight or flee. This is what animals do out of instinct; they have only the 2 Alternatives. But mature human beings can choose a 3rd Alternative.

Practicing the three paradigms of synergy will help you arrive at a 3rd Alternative that makes the conflict irrelevant.

Paradigm 1 - "I See Myself."

You have the power to stand outside yourself and think about your own thoughts and feelings. You can examine your own motives: "Why am I caught up in this? Am I being egocentric? Do I need attention or affirmation? Do I feel my status is being threatened? Or am I genuinely concerned about this issue?" If you are already sure of your own self-worth, if you already feel confident about your own contribution and capability, you don't need to defend yourself. You can express yourself candidly.

Paradigm 2 - "I See You."

You demonstrate profound respect for the other person. You value their ideas, their experience, their perspective, and their feelings.

Paradigm 3 - "I Seek You Out."

You are intrigued, not threatened, by the gap between you and the other person. Nothing defuses the negative energy of a conflict faster than to say, "You see things differently. I need to listen to you." And mean it.

Ultimately, you are looking for something better than either party has originally considered, where everybody wins. When applying the 3rd Alternative, chances are you won't even remember what the original fight was all about.