

# **CONFLICT IS AN OPPORTUNITY**

TWENTY FUNDAMENTAL DECISIONS  
FOR NAVIGATING DIFFICULT TIMES

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## DECISION 19

Which sources of **power**  
are available in this conflict?  
Which are being **used**  
and **endorsed**?

The question is not *whether* you will use power, but *how*.

Humans are adept at living and working together and are consistently innovative in uncovering sources of power that help us to do so. At the same time, when conflict emerges, we often throw those abilities out the window and adopt a win/lose mentality, taking an isolating, adversarial approach to accessing and using power. We can, however, choose differently.

## Practice seeing power not as a monolithic force, but as a fluid complex of counterinfluence in which we are all engaged.

Power in itself is neither good nor bad, and we cannot remove it from the equation of human interaction. We all have access to power and we all necessarily use power as we move through the world. Power arises through multiple sources, and the sources of power we access are different from the uses to which we put that power.

In the reference section at the end of the book, you will find a list of power sources. To consider how the use of power is shaping your situation, check in with this list to see which sources of power you and others are primarily paying attention to, using, and valuing and which sources are not being accessed or endorsed. Notice that when only a few sources of power are foregrounded, we can lose track of other kinds of power that may exist and could be utilized. When this happens, it can be easy to feel helpless or to attribute helplessness to others. Recognizing the types of power at play in conflict and the real palette of power resources available can expand our ability to see where we are and to find traction for useful motion.

Power is always relational and based on the characteristics of the people or the situation. We give each other and ourselves power through what we value, need, and want. For example, if I have food and you are hungry, I have the power to help meet your need, and through your hunger you may endorse that power—name it as valuable. If, however, you are not hungry, are willing to go hungry, or have another source of food, then this power is not an active force in the relationship. In the endorsement and use of power, we are inescapably and dynamically interdependent.

Power is rarely balanced in a conflict. There is usually a relative difference in the amount or types of power that people are accessing. Ignoring these power dynamics does not help reduce destructive conflict, it just makes its mechanisms less evident. At the same time, the presence of a power difference between you and the person or people with whom you are in conflict does not necessarily block productive ways forward. Awareness of these differences can help us move with greater accuracy and understanding to find effective strategies for action.

Power is mobile and always emerging. The power that others have does not prevent you from building and using power yourself. This doesn't mean that everyone has equal access to the same kinds of power, rather, that each person has access to some kind of power, which can be built on or strengthened through uniting with others.

Crucially, it is possible to build power both with those you see as being on the same side of a conflict as you and those you see as being in opposition. The people on different sides of conflict can often work in concert to build power together that is greater than the power each person, or group, could build on their own. Keep in mind that this is a possibility, even when it seems unlikely.

## Although division can be persuasively self-strengthening, question its aura of permanence.

We have a choice. We can see conflict as a battleground and act coercively to try to squelch power in the other and build power isolated in ourselves. Or, if our ultimate goal in the situation is not simply to attack or disempower the other, but rather to find ways to meet needs, then we can recognize that the power each person has is vital in that process and we can seek to engage that power. There are very few situations where the best long-term strategy for meeting needs is to decimate the other person or people. Be curious about how power might be productively magnified through connection, even in difficult times.

This does not suggest that we let ourselves be run over by the other or subjugate our interests to theirs, or that we allow destructive behavior to continue unchecked, or be resigned to discrimination and inequality. Rather, this is a suggestion that we look realistically at the landscape of interconnection and counterinfluence through which we are always moving, and act with that complex matrix of forces in mind.

Power helps us meet needs. If we use power coercively to meet only our own needs, then we are addressing only part of the landscape of the needs and wants that are creating the dynamic of the conflict. With that limited approach, the solutions that we—unilaterally—decide on and, through coercion, try to enforce are likely to be ineffective in the long run. Fortunately, we are always free to take a broader view.

We can move toward effective solutions in difficult situations by persistently acknowledging our ongoing relationship to the whole of our environment. We can keep building our ability to ask questions like: “What if we did find a way forward that worked for everyone, what might that look like?” We can keep examining how the power that we and others hold in the situation might make motion toward that outcome possible. And finally, we can call up our curiosity and courage and take concrete action to make that common motion a reality.

The process of choosing  
noncoercive uses of power  
and integrating our power  
with others is not a naïve ideal;  
it is an accurate reflection of  
our lively state of interdependence  
and counterinfluence.

Successful and long-term relationships need a broader view of power than win/lose. Power is not a zero-sum game and endorsing power in another does not mean that we diminish our own. The power systems in your life are dynamic and mobile and you are part of them. In the evolving systems of interdependent action that we are constantly creating and re-creating together, consider how you will choose to use power to impact the world and the life it holds.