



Divide or Conquer

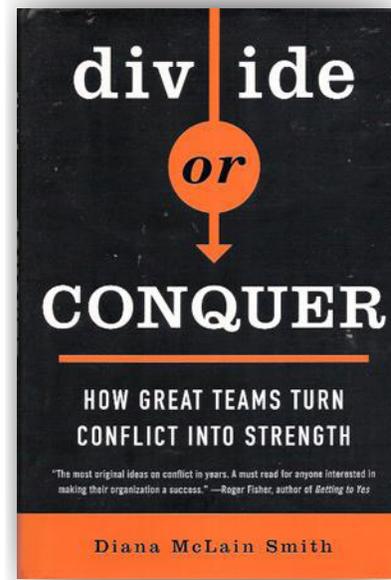
How Great Teams Turn Conflict Into Strength

Diana McLain Smith

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Reviewed by Karen McHenry

INTRODUCTION

Teams are only as strong as their weakest relationships. How well and how quickly groups make decisions, inspire innovation, tackle performance problems or learn from mistakes depends on the strength of the team. Since an organization's performance relies on the quality of its most important relationships, it is important to understand how these relationships can be transformed to create value.

In **Divide or Conquer**, Diana McLain Smith has created a book that sheds new light on old relationship dilemmas. Through research and case studies, she explains how relationships may be the single most underutilized lever for transforming the performance of teams and organizations. The author offers tools

for understanding relationships, transforming relationships, and making change practical. Readers will learn how to map patterns of interaction, reframe how they view others, and analyze what strategy may be most effective for transforming a relationship.

PART I: UNDERSTANDING RELATIONSHIPS

The interplay between the formal and informal sides of a relationship determines whether it will grow more brittle over time or become more resilient. The *formal* side of a relationship includes roles, responsibilities, calculating financial rewards, and other factors. Many tools exist for managing these formal aspects of a relationship. However when it comes to the *informal* side of a relationship, there are few tools and people are

forced to use intuition as a guide. When people ignore the informal side of a relationship, they are more likely to view problems from an “either/or” perspective. This escalates conflict, harms relationships, and destroys value. In contrast, when people understand the underlying anatomy of a relationship, they are apt to view troubles from a relational perspective.

Understanding these relationship dynamics is essential to learning why people form ill-fated matches, why certain personalities clash, and why some relationships break down under pressure.

How Relationships Form, Develop, and Die

When someone joins a team, a great deal of time is spent defining formal roles. Yet at the same time, people are also defining their informal roles. Through their interactions, they signal to one another the emotional responsibilities they will assume, the psychological rewards they will need, and the interpersonal rights they will claim. All relationships headed for trouble have one thing in common – those involved do not pay enough attention to the informal aspects.

As a relationship develops, each person has their own characteristic ways of interacting with others, based on *behavioral repertoires*. Repertoires are organized around key themes, such as power, conflict, control, or success. These themes shape the way a relationship’s patterns of interaction evolve over time, defining the formal and informal sides of a relationship.

In the second stage of relationship development, initial impressions give way to more stable impressions. As a result, people renegotiate their formal and informal roles. These more stable interpretations are referred to as *frames* by the author. Frames inform people’s negotiations about who should do what and they give relationships their distinctive character. Those who pay attention to how the informal side of a relationship develops during this stage understand that “what they see is what they will get.” This recognition gives people the room to maneuver, if they do not like what they see. In contrast, those who ignore the relationship’s informal side believe that what they see is the only way that things can be, leaving them disillusioned and trapped.

When relationships are in trouble, people should realize that they can change the way they see and interact

KEY CONCEPTS

Since an organization’s performance relies on the quality of its most important relationships, it is important to understand how relationships can be transformed to create value. The author proposes a three stage process for changing a relationship:

1. Disrupt the patterns of interaction. This involves three steps: assessing the relationship, mapping the patterns of interaction, and designing action experiments.
2. Reframe how people see one another. The three stages for reframing include: freezing frames, inventing new frames, and designing frame experiments.
3. Revise what is “known” to be true. To revise the foundations of a relationship, people must revisit past events, restructure their knowledge, and “return to the future” to make changes.

Use tools, such as the Investment Matrix and Sequencing Matrix, to help identify which relationships to invest in and when.



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with each other. However, because they ignore the informal side of relationships, people are more likely to create relationships that leave them with little choice. This leads to failure and the death of the relationship.

The Anatomy Framework

When people reach the point where their difficulties must be addressed, most have already reached conclusions about each other. In some cases, they may have spent months or years trying to get the other person to behave differently. Smith's **Anatomy Framework** is a tool that uncovers and maps the four elements that combine to give a relationship its distinct character.

1. *Actions and Reactions.* Actions refer to what a person actually says and does, while reactions refer to what someone actually thinks and feels in response. Each person's actions make the other's reactions more explicable.
2. *Frames* are the interpretations, embedded in our reactions, that make some possible courses of action seem obvious, while others are viewed as impractical.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana McLain Smith is a partner at the Monitor Group, a global management consulting firm, where she teaches, consults, and conducts research. She is also a founding partner of Action Design, a small firm specializing in organizational learning and professional development. For nearly three decades, she has advised hundreds of leaders while doing research on teams, leadership, negotiation, and organizational change. Smith has taught courses and delivered lectures at the Harvard Law School's Program on Negotiation, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Boston College's Carroll School of Management.

3. *Social Contexts* are the contextual backdrop against which some triggering event occurs, promoting the need to respond. Examples of social contexts include formal roles, time constraints, and historical events.
4. *Behavioral Repertoires* are largely unconscious experiential knowledge and interpretive strategies. They define the range of responses available to an individual for framing and acting in different social contexts.

To change the course of a relationship, people need to slow down and look at what they're actually feeling, thinking, and doing with each other, so they can see that they're not nearly as helpless as they think they are.

Interlocking frames and actions serve as the engine that drives a relationship. Social contexts, in conjunction with behavioral repertoires, provide the fuel that keeps the engine going. Unfortunately, people often experience asymmetrical awareness, meaning they are conscious of their reactions to another person's actions, but are unaware of the impact their actions have on the other person. This leads people to see only half of the actions and reactions which occur in a relationship.

By mapping the underlying anatomy of a relationship, people can stand outside the relationship and observe what they cannot see from the inside. The Anatomy Framework helps reveal how people's roles contribute to creating dysfunctional relationships.

Resilience and Relationships

Resilience is a matter of perspective. Resilience depends on the ability to think about stressful events in a complex way, to see what each person is doing that creates undesirable results, and to experience more than anger when upset. People tend to view relationships through one of two perspectives: "either/or" or "relational". The either/or perspective creates vicious cycles in relationships which destroy value. In contrast, a relational perspective helps decision-makers create options that balance competing interests. It prompts each person to examine their problematic behaviors.

The author asserts that everybody processes events through a hot system and a cool system. The *hot system* includes all the hot buttons which lead people to react quickly, without thinking. The *cool system* contains an interconnected set of ideas which help people to think calmly about events. A well performing cool system contains a stock of ideas that a person can draw on to think coolly about a wide range of events. The ability to access this cool system is dependent on two things: how well developed the cool system is and how well connected it is to the hot system.

Reflecting and reframing are the processes by which people can cool down together. These two cooling strategies help people to shift perspective and use emotions to think things through together. Over time, reflecting and reframing develops the relationship's cool system and improves access to it. This can make a relationship more resilient.

To change patterns, you have to throw a monkey wrench into the works by thinking – and then acting – outside the pattern. If you find that difficult to imagine, let alone do, you have lots of company.

PART II: TRANSFORMING RELATIONSHIPS

Change cannot occur in teams or organizations unless the component relationships also change. One of the reasons that people change slowly is because others expect them to change independently of the relationships in which they operate. Just as it takes time to build relationships, it takes time to change them. Change cannot occur all at once; it must proceed in stages. In the first stage of change, people disrupt the patterns of interaction that are creating obstacles. In the second, they create more satisfying patterns. In the third, they reset the foundation of their relationship, so new patterns can take hold.

Disrupting Patterns of Interaction

Early on in a relationship, the most important thing people can do is to slow down and take a closer look at how their relationship works. Smith believes that people come to know one another so well over time, that they no longer know each other at all –they only see one another as caricatures. To disrupt ingrained patterns of interaction, three steps must be taken:

assess the relationship, map patterns of interaction, and design action experiments.

- *Assessing Relationships:* Demands and constraints combine to create pressures that burden relationships. When people ignore these pressures, they are much more likely to turn against one another. When they do take stock, however, people are more likely to turn together towards the challenges they face. When assessing a relationship, it is useful to evaluate the relationship's assets and liabilities. This helps to anticipate what may cause problems under pressure, and it also identifies the assets that can be used to deal with difficulties when they arise.
- *Mapping Patterns of Interaction:* This step enables people to focus on those interactions that relate to concerns raised in the assessment phase. The

author suggests capturing critical interactions, describing them in concrete terms, and mapping the patterns underlying the interactions. The key to describing interactions is to focus attention

on people's behavior, rather than their motives. When people focus on motives before describing behaviors, they come up with speculations that are disconnected from the actual behavior. The purpose of mapping is to understand a pattern well enough to successfully change it. After seeing how the pattern works, people can then imagine how it might work differently.

- *Designing Action Experiments:* To change patterns, people need to think and act outside those patterns. Action experiments are designed to disrupt patterns and make them more amenable to change. The first step in any action experiment is to look at the interlocking actions and reactions depicted in a map and to ask, "What actions can I take to make it hard for the other person to react in the way he or she usually does?" Action experiments should go against the grain of people's behavioral repertoires. Since all patterns are a product of behavior repertoires, contradicting the repertoires is key to disrupting behavioral patterns.

Reframing Views of One Another

The only way to create a significantly new pattern in a relationship is to transform the way that the two people see one another. To reframe perspectives, the author proposes three steps: freezing frames, inventing new frames, and designing frame experiments. The reframing process is difficult because people will shift frames only if they are convinced by evidence that a change is warranted.

1. *Freezing Frames.* While reactions tend to vary from pattern to pattern in a relationship, the interpretations embedded in those reactions grow more stable with time. Smith refers to these stable interpretations as “frames”. Frames turn patterns of interaction into more enduring relationship structures without the people involved even realizing it. Yet, these frame-based structures determine the range and quality of patterns that exist in a relationship. By shifting frames, people can shift the structure underlying the relationship, thereby increasing the range and quality of its patterns. There are three stages to freezing a frame. First, people must use emotionally charged moments to uncover their reactions. Next, they need to name the frames embedded in those reactions. Lastly, they must map the way the frames intersect.
2. *Inventing New Frames.* In order to invent new frames, people must examine how their existing frames interlock and keep old patterns in place. A key question is how frames lead each person to act in ways that reinforce the other person’s frame. Inventing new frames causes new patterns to be created. The best frames are those that make it easier for both people in the relationship to be at their best. It is helpful to have a word or phrase that a person can say to themselves in the heat of the moment to remind them of the new frame.
3. *Designing Frame Experiments.* Frame experiments are intended to create experiences that alter frames, allowing new patterns to emerge. These experiments can be based on the new frames that have been invented. After conducting a frame ex-

periment, people must interpret the results. When examining results, people should not look to confirm old frames, but rather look for subtle shifts in what happened. If no shifts have occurred, look at the actions taken and see if they really follow from the new frame.

All too often and much to our dismay, frustrating patterns of interaction persist despite our efforts to change them. The reason is simple: we give short shrift to the interpretations that keep them going. Left to their own devices, these interpretations have a nasty habit of getting stuck in one gear.

Revising What is “Known” to be True

As people work to transform their relationships, they must go back and revisit the knowledge that they bring to the relationship. This requires *revisiting past events, restructuring outdated knowledge, and returning to the future.*

According to the author, many of us underestimate the residual effects of childhood events. These occurrences live on into adulthood, shaping how people see themselves and those around them. To revisit past events in the context of a troubled relationship, people must identify and document the historical events that remind them most of the relationship. Different stories, propositions, values and practical strategies can be extracted which may demonstrate how past experiences are affecting current relationships.

To reset the basis of a relationship, the experiential knowledge that each person brings to the table must be restructured. Two questions can help with this process. Where is the experiential knowledge breaking down? How can it be restructured so it better fits the current circumstances and abilities? The answers to these questions will identify what each person can do differently in their most important relationships.

All of the stages for transforming a relationship culminate by returning to the future. In this phase, gains are consolidated, new objectives are defined, new challenges are anticipated, and the terms of a new relationship are established. People must identify the objectives they want to achieve in the future and anticipate what challenges those objectives will pose

for the relationship. By making explicit commitments, including how each person will help the other, people set the terms of the new relationship.

PART III: MAKING CHANGE PRACTICAL

To make relationship change practical, there are three challenges that must be addressed: *determining where to invest limited resources, balancing the demands of change with the demands of running a business, and sustaining motivation for change over time.*

When it comes to relationships that operate along organizational fault lines, people should invest in making them strong enough to handle the tensions that will build up and the conflicts that will erupt at each of those interfaces.

In a world where resources are limited, it is important to focus and sequence change efforts, so that the greatest impact is gained for the least amount of effort. Not all relationships within teams require or deserve the same amount or the same kind of effort. To help decide which relationships to invest in and when, the author recommends using the Investment Matrix and the Sequencing Matrix. The Investment Matrix determines where to focus investments, while the Sequencing Matrix identifies when to invest in relationships.

The **Investment Matrix** groups relationships in terms of their relative importance and interdependence. The basic idea behind the matrix is simple: only invest in transforming relationships that are both highly important and highly interdependent. All other relationships can be handled through more conventional approaches.

The importance of a relationship can be assessed along three dimensions: strategic, symbolic, and developmental. With regard to *strategic considerations*, one must ask to what extent the people in the relationship are uniquely qualified to fulfill a strategically critical role.

When considering the *symbolic importance* of a relationship, one must ask to what extent the people in the organization look to the people in the relationship (or the relationship itself) for meaning, guidance, or

a sense of purpose. The more symbolically important a relationship is, the faster events related to that relationship will travel through the organization.

From a *developmental* point of view, it is important to consider to what extent a relationship either reveals a leader's liabilities or highlights their strengths. The more a relationship has the potential to bring out the best or worst in a leader, the more impact it will have on that person's development as a leader.

When people are interdependent, they rely on relationships, not formal mechanisms, to accomplish objectives and to resolve conflicts. The more leaders rely on relationships, the more demands are put on the informal structures underlying

them. In assessing interdependence in a relationship, three factors are critical: information, coordination, and decision-making. Key questions related to these dimensions include the extent the people in a relationship need to:

- Share information quickly and fully to accomplish key tasks?
- Coordinate key activities to get things done?
- Be involved in the same decisions?

The Investment Matrix identifies four potential approaches for addressing a relationship:

1. **Ignore** – If two or more people do not depend much on each other and their relationships are not strategically important, these relationships and any negative effects they create can be ignored. The costs created by these relationships will be less than the cost of investing in them.
2. **Separate** – If people's roles are highly dependent, but the people are not uniquely qualified to fulfill those roles, structural separation is the best way to handle relationship problems that resist resolution. Leaders might transfer or promote one of the people into a new role, or create a new structure that reduces interdependence.
3. **Manage** – If people are vital to their roles, but the roles themselves are not that interdependent, any negative effects the relationship creates should be manageable, because they should be infrequent.

4. Transform – This approach makes sense when people are vital to strategic roles *and* when their success cannot be achieved without their depending on each other.

After using the Investment Matrix to identify the relationships in need of investment, the next step is to use the **Sequencing Matrix** to sequence those investments over time. Smith suggests starting with high-impact relationships that have the greatest chance of succeeding. To determine impact, relationships can be assessed along two dimensions: impact on people and impact on the business. The more that people's relationships undercut their effectiveness or their well-being, the sooner changes should be made. From a business perspective, if people's differences are harming critical decisions or the pace with which they get made, relationship changes should be pursued.

Strategies for Changing Relationships

The **FREE** model describes a set of three strategies that can be used to intervene when two or more people are caught in a conflict that jeopardizes the quality of substantive discussions and the fate of key relationships. The FREE model refers to Facilitate, Reflect and Reframe, and Engage.

Before selecting one of these strategies, it is wise to stop, look, and listen. *Stopping* enables people to gain enough perspective to make sound assessments. *Looking* allows people to map patterns in their heads so they can assess their impact on progress. *Listening* reveals what lies behind views, so one can assess how important a topic is.

In choosing among strategies, it is not important to look at who is doing what to whom. Instead, it is crucial to determine how each person is contributing to a pattern that is obstructing progress. Patterns that narrow a conversation usually take the form of adversarial, repetitious debates among a very small number of people. Patterns that create superficial discussions generally use abstract assertions and counter-assertions about the right values or ends to pursue.

When selecting a strategy to use, it is helpful to picture the three strategies along a continuum. At one end is *facilitating*. This strategy is the least invasive. It keeps people's attention squarely focused on the business, while subtly shifting patterns of interaction that are slowing progress. It makes most sense to facilitate when progress must be made quickly and interactions are not so dysfunctional that their impact cannot be managed.

When a company runs into trouble, we have no difficulty talking about its performance. We may not always agree, but we have a wide range of tools and techniques to help us analyze the market and figure out what went wrong. Not so with relationships.

On the other end of the continuum is *engaging*. This strategy is the most invasive. It shifts the group's attention away from business issues and onto patterns of interaction that continually prevent progress on critical business issues. It has the greatest impact on relationships, but often requires the help of a highly skilled third-party. This strategy is best used when patterns of interaction persistently impede progress or when less obtrusive interventions do not work.

Between facilitating and engaging is *reflecting and reframing*. This midway strategy touches on patterns just long enough to disrupt them, while returning quickly to the substantive issues at hand. The objective is to facilitate discussion of conflicts by legitimizing differences. Reflecting and reframing also stops people from blaming each other by interpreting behavior from a relational standpoint. This strategy is best used when progress must be made quickly, but interactions are becoming so repetitive and superficial that facilitation alone cannot shift things.

Motivating Change

Change in relationships is difficult, but three common mistakes make it even harder. First, people set unrealistic expectations. They believe that it is possible to make significant changes quickly and then give up as soon as reality sets in. Next, people don't anticipate barriers or see the need to help each other overcome them. They assume that if people want to change, they will change relatively quickly. What they fail to real-

ize is that ingrained ways of seeing and doing things lie largely outside their awareness. Finally, people micromanage the pace and direction of changes. When plans meet reality, slippage occurs. Instead of putting it to work, most try to stamp it out.

The author recommends three principles to keep spirits up in the face of change: using dual vision to set sights, building resilience while taking stock, and putting the fun back in the dysfunctional.

To be motivated enough to invest in a risky and demanding change effort, people need to use *dual vision*. They must set goals that are ambitious and realistic on one hand and practically important and personally meaningful on the other. For change to be worth trying, people need a model of change that shows them how a series of smaller, more modest goals will eventually add up to bigger and bolder ones. Most people have a simultaneous interest in practical outcomes and in existential ones. To sustain people's commitment to change over time, change efforts must articulate goals that are both practically important and personally meaningful.

Most people do not expect change efforts to be perfect, but they do expect observable, meaningful progress as a result of their efforts. To keep people motivated, organizations must *take stock of progress and use any setbacks to build resilience over time*. It helps to have clear metrics – ones that help you see how far one has come and how far they have to go. Reflecting and reframing are a productive way to learn from setbacks, mistakes and failures.

The third way to bolster morale is to put the *fun back in dysfunctional*. Making the costs of change easier to bear is essential. It helps to maintain a sense of humor. Lighten things up by laughing at the unlaughable and manufacturing hope where none lies.

CODA: RELATIONAL SENSIBILITIES

By cultivating relational sensibilities, people can naturally build relationships that bring out the best in others and in themselves. Relational sensibilities cannot be taught through theory and technique alone. They are cultivated by helping people create new meaning out of difficult experiences in the context of strong relationships.

Every leader leads through relationships. Leaders who are especially adept at this demonstrate a set of highly developed relational sensibilities such as: curiosity and courage, humility and hope, appreciation and acknowledgement, nuance and novelty, generosity and generativity, and empathy combined with a sense of accountability. These sensibilities spring from a combination of three factors: challenging experiences, new meaning, and strong relationships.



FEATURES OF THE BOOK

Reading Time: 8 to 9 hours, 290 pages

To create a great team, managers must understand how the relationships within that team work, develop, and change. Smith believes that organizations need a navigational system with which to see and traverse the unpredictable terrain called relationships. **Divide or Conquer** is designed for anyone committed to building an exceptional team.

Diana McLain Smith provides practical guidance on how to transform problematic relationships. Readers are guided step-by-step through a series of tools and frameworks that help team members to analyze relationships, recognize patterns of interaction, reframe perspectives, and restructure the basis of their relationships.

Throughout the book, case studies are used to illustrate core concepts. Each major part of the book begins with a brief review of the section's purpose and a synopsis of its content. Most chapters conclude with a recap of key points. "Taking Action" callout boxes clearly explain how readers can apply tools and frameworks to their individual situations. The book is designed to be read from cover to cover, as concepts build on earlier content. However, for those who have already read the book or simply need a surface-level overview of the content, the key points and Taking Action sections can serve this function. The book includes a comprehensive index for those who seek to review information on a specific topic. Finally, the work includes a chapter-by-chapter list of notes that the reader can utilize to explore topics further.

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