

## Transcript – Episode 89 - [Conflict Can Be Good for Your Organization with Nate Regier](#)

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Welcome to the Successful Nonprofits™ Podcast. I'm your host Dolph Goldenburg. Today's conversation is about conflict. What happened in your body when I said that word? For some people, the word alone can cause a physiological reaction. Muscles tense slightly. The heart beats a little bit faster, and breathing becomes a bit shallower. All this from just the word conflict. No matter what your personal reaction, conflict, the thing, not just the word, is inevitable. We'll have conflict between people, between groups, between organizations, between countries. Conflict is just a part of life. Now, how we handle conflict, what we do with that energy is the subject of the latest book by my guest, Dr. Nate Regier. Nate is a clinical psychologist and current CEO and co-founder of Next Element, a consulting firm specializing in communication and conflict skills. I kind of liked that I'm calling a conflict skills, not conflict resolution. It's sort of how do we go about having conflict. He is also the author of *Conflict Without Casualties: A Field Guide for Leading with Compassionate Accountability*. Let's jump right into this. I feel like this is a topic that will really resonate with our listeners.

Hey, welcome to the podcast, Nate.

**Nate Regier:** Hey, great to be here.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** I am wondering if you can give us a brief overview of the life experiences that led you to study conflict and communication at such a deep level.

**Nate Regier:** Thank you. It actually has been something that's been developing for a long time with me. I would say it's been my life's journey that I've only realized recently. Probably the seeds were put in place when I was growing up in Africa as the son of missionary parents, and my parents were with a denomination called the Mennonite Church. People that have heard of Mennonites know that one thing we're known for is a nonviolence piece and that kind of an ethic of spreading peace and nonviolence. I grew up the message, turn the other cheek, never hurt anybody. No matter what anybody does or says to you, never resort to violence. I did internalize that, yet I grew up around a lot of unrest and political violence, and something inside just told me that avoiding the conflict or just saying you're never going to resort to violence, there's got to be a better way because there's just so much energy wrapped up in conflict that seems like it could be used somehow. Growing up in Zaire and then in Botswana during apartheid, when Nelson Mandela was still in prison, I got to see a lot of violence. Also, as I was coming of age, I continued to just yearn and search for different and better ways to do conflict where people didn't have to get hurt.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** So, where did that search take you?

**Nate Regier:** It took me into psychology. I've always been a student of human beings, and I feel like I actually have a lot in common with military kids. Believe it or not, because we both have traveled a lot. We've both had to make build relationships a lot, and we see a lot of things. And you kind of have to become a student of human condition to be able to fit in. It took me into the

study of psychology to try to understand why people do what they do and then later on into a business where I got to apply the social sciences into working with corporate groups and businesses around how to communicate and how to deal with conflict when people have differences and disagreements.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Let's jump into your days as a clinical psychologist for a minute. Were you doing like couples, family therapy, industrial psychology, what type of psychology were you doing?

**Nate Regier:** I was doing a lot of stuff. I had the great fortune of being able to work in a large multispecialty behavioral health system. My specialty was neuropsychological assessment and addictions treatment, and so I did a lot of addictions therapy and group therapy and a lot of assessments. I found myself doing group therapy, marriage and family and couples therapy like you mentioned and getting more into mind, body, spirit Health and integrated behavioral medicine – trying to see the whole person. Then that took me more into industrial organizational because anytime you're working with mind, body, spirit and medical stuff, we're bound to run into organizational issues and health insurance and wellness. That's how I found myself in the corporate world.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** What did you learn about conflict?

**Nate Regier:** What I learned is the conference has a bad rap. I was so glad the way you introduced it as conflict skills, not conflict mediation. If you Google the word conflict, you know how Google will autofill phrases and words that work with it. The most common words you'll see are reduction, mediation, management, control. All of those words may conflict out to be something we're supposed to get rid of. I've discovered that conflict has a bad rap, and there are several myths that people have about conflict. Some of those myths are with good reason, but they're still myths because they're not true.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** What are a couple of those myths?

**Nate Regier:** The first one is that conflict is bad. Just that alone. That myth goes with the one that people always get hurt when there's conflict.

Now, I may have grown up in a home where maybe when there was conflict, people got angry. Maybe I grew up in a family where fights broke out, and people got hurt or maybe I spent time in a workplace where whenever there was conflict it was all about dominating and winning and losing. And it became very adversarial. Maybe I have some negative associations with conflict, but that's just my personal experience. That doesn't mean conflict is bad or that people always get hurt.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** So, it sounds like you feel there's good conflict and there is sometimes bad conflict.

**Nate Regier:** I do. I really do. And it kind of depends on how we define conflict. Our working definition at Next Element is that conflict is simply the gap between what I want and what I'm experiencing at any point in time. And it's just energy. That gap could be as simple as what I want is to be at work at 8:00 in the morning and what I'm getting is 12 people in front of me at Starbucks, and two of their espresso machines are broken. So, we got a gap, and that gap in and of itself is just energy.

The real question is how are we going to spend that energy, and how are we going to attempt to close the gap? That's where it can be positive or negative.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** How do you see that working in nonprofit organizations?

**Nate Regier:** That's a great question, and I'm so glad to be on your podcast with this focus because most of my life, I've been working in nonprofits or working with nonprofits. I was with a nonprofit the entire time growing up, and my whole clinical career was with nonprofits. I think that nonprofits and faith-based organizations share some really interesting dynamics when it comes to conflict. Most nonprofits are formed because people are passionate and because people want to help, and they want to make a difference in the world, so they've got a lot of passion, a lot of commitment, and a lot of conviction. They have big hearts. That leads to on the plus side, we see all of the benefits of that service in the world.

On the downside, we see some very interesting dynamics and conflict that relate to what we call the drama triangle. People with certain positive gifts do very predictable negative things when there's conflict, and so that's where it gets specifically to nonprofits to answer your question. When people get sideways in conflict and they're not using it well, they play one or more of three roles called the drama triangle, and one of the roles is the *Persecutor*. They go on the attack and say, hey, you're the problem. Another role is the role of the *Victim* where they say, no, I'm the problem, and then there's the third role called the role of the *Rescuer* which says, hey, you know what? I'm the solution, and they think that they've got everybody's answers. Now, people that are highly convicted and passionate tend to play the persecutor when they're not in a good space. It's very easy to go from, I believe in this and I'm going to change the world to everyone's not committed enough and it's everyone's problem and we're all going to hell in a handbasket, or the person that's a huge caregiver and their heart goes out to people on a bad day they might say, I'm not good enough. I can't do enough. I'm never doing enough. I'm not living up to standards. What we see is in nonprofits, there's a lot of victim behavior and a lot of persecutor behavior going on even between the people within the organization.

Long answer...

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Sorry. There was kind of a long pause there because I was sort of reflecting on my own experience in the nonprofit sector and in general in the workforce. I think you're dead on there that you know in one situation we play the persecutor and another situation, we play the victim and in a third situation we play the rescuer, the one is like, I'm going to come in and save the day. Now, how do we break out of that model?

**Nate Regier:** Great question. The way we break out of the model is to accept the fundamental reality that we are okay, that human beings are worthwhile, that we might have differences and disagreements and we may have conflict in terms of what we want and what we're getting, but the people are okay. First, separate the behavior and the content of what's happening from the people involved. The second thing is to make a decision to choose effectiveness instead of choosing to feel justified, and that is such a core human desire. When the going gets tough, we want to be able to say, see, I was right. There are a winner and a loser, and so feeling justified is such a rush. It's like a shot of adrenaline or a drug, and people want to feel justified, but when they're doing that, they're incapable of being effective. Those are two fundamental choices that we have to make to be able to then go into conflict without casualties.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** How should boards or staffs handle the bomb thrower? So you know, the person who really just thrives on conflict, loves to light the grenade, throw it into the center, and then scurry away and kind of laugh as it blows everything up.

**Nate Regier:** Oh Man. They play a game called let's watch you and him fight. It's their favorite thing. The answer lies in the root of the word compassion. And this is why it's such a big word for us. The word compassion means to struggle with, to suffer alongside. Compassionate accountability is about holding people accountable while preserving their dignity. In these kinds of situations, when someone throws a bomb in the room, we can play the victim, or we can play the persecutor, the rescuer, or we can choose to practice what's called compassionate accountability. We get honest with them and with ourselves about how we're feeling. We get crystal clear about the gap and what's going on, and then we talk openly about what is at stake here, what are the principles, the non-negotiables, what are the expectations, and through it all, we maintain this core fundamental belief that we're worthwhile, capable and accountable.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Can you give me a real-world example of where you kind of lead a group through that?

**Nate Regier:** Yeah, absolutely. We teach people how to practice three skills: openness, resourcefulness and persistence, and each one of those comes in a specific order. We teach people how to address conflict and address the gap openly, resourcefully and persistently. Let's take the situation of someone that just drops a bomb in the meeting and then it doesn't seem to want to deal with the shrapnel. Openness would be to either come clean with them about how I'm feeling like I'm feeling defensive, I'm feeling angry, I'm feeling unprepared about what just happened. Without blaming them, take full responsibility for my feelings. Then go to resourcefulness and explained the situation and say, you know, I didn't know what to say just now because I was expecting this to happen or whatever.

So, explain the situation and then at persistence get clear about why its so important. For example, as a team, we have made a commitment to be honest with each other about ideas and not surprise each other or we've agreed that we're not going to bring agenda items to the meeting that have not been vetted ahead of time or you know, one of our core principles as a team is blah blah blah, and this was violated just now when you did that. So, then going back to

open and checking in with that person. And so, it might be saying straight to that person, I'm really uncomfortable right now. I was unprepared for that because I didn't know you were going to bring it up. We had agreed that we were not going to talk about agenda items that were not brought to the team ahead of time, and you did that.

So, what's your perspective? And that's the routine, and it's called compassionate accountability.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** In my consulting practice, I sometimes refer to that as rules of engagement. It's like we've all agreed as a group to here's how we're going to engage with each other, and we had to work through them. Then we document them, write them down and distribute them. We're like, okay, this is how we're going to work together and engage. This sounds really similar.

**Nate Regier:** I like that because teams will go to a lot of work to establish their norms, their rules of engagement, their principles, and that's **p**, that's persistence. That's all fine and good until it's violated, which is inevitable. So, now as soon as it's violated, we have a gap between what we want and what's happening. The real question now is, how are we going to deal with the gap? We deal with it by sharing our emotional experience, explaining the gap and then referencing the principle that was at stake in that order.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Nate, we're going to take a short break, and when we come back, we're going to talk about conflict with your supervisor or with someone who reports to you.

Are you part of an organization? Yes, you say? Well, then conflict is part of your life. Wait a second. Let me change the question. Are you a human being? Again, conflict is, has been or will be part of your life. Today, we're learning and talking about some new ways of viewing the fact of conflict in today's podcast. Sometimes, it's good. Sometimes, it's bad, but there are ways to really use conflict to be better and stronger. In my work, I often encounter boards of directors that are having serious conflict issues sometimes within the board itself, sometimes with the executive director, sometimes with the broader community. As you know, boards struggling in conflict are rarely boards accomplishing much of anything other than just struggling with conflict, and some of my proudest accomplishments as a consultant have been helping boards moved through that struggle and become a respectful, dynamic, healthy, functioning entity. If your board is struggling, give me a call. I'm happy to spend a little bit of time with you and see what I might be able to do to help and of course you can always reach out to me at [www.goldenburggroupp.com](http://www.goldenburggroupp.com).

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Welcome back to our conversation with Dr. Nate Regier, author of *Conflict Without Casualties: A Field Guide for Leading with Compassionate Accountability*. All right, so Nate, all this as well and good when it's between equals, when it's board members or colleagues, but what do you do if it's the board chair and the executive director, or if it's the program manager and the case manager? How do you navigate this conflict?

**Nate Regier:** Well, here's the simple and scary answer. It's no different because we're still equal, and we're equal human beings. That's the key. Maybe the question I'm hearing is, what about if

we're different in terms of the structure and authority within an organization? How do we do that? And this principle works. One of the things we see most exciting is when people are able to lead up and do conflict with a superior, and very often it seems like, well, I could never do that because they would see it as disrespectful or they would see me as challenging their authority. I would get hammered for it. Amazingly, the whole outcome of compassionate accountability is to struggle with people, not against them. No boss wants you to struggle against them. They want to be helpful. They want to retain their dignity, and they want to retain their sense of being a helpful source.

Here's an example. Let's say that from my supervisor, I'm not getting good information. They won't be clear with me about a project, but then I give them something, and they always say, you missed a spot. I wish, why wouldn't you have told me that ahead of time? It's like you keep me guessing all the time. I could never satisfy. You know, I'm not to say that to my boss, but what if I came to my boss, and I started opening, and I said, I feel confused and unclear. I want to be certain about your expectations so I can deliver a product that you're proud of. What ideas do you have to help me be clear about your expectations before I start working? Because I'm committed to delivering you a product that you like at the, at the beginning instead of having to Redo work. How does that sound to you? Now, I've just confronted my boss.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** I'd be willing to bet that most supervisors would think that was being proactive and a positive thing.

**Nate Regier:** Let's say I mess up, and I got to come clean with my boss. I want to do a compassionate accountability apology. I come to my boss, and I say something like, I feel really embarrassed. That's my open. I go to resourceful, and I say, here's what happened. I did this and this and this. This was the consequences. This is how it affected our constituency. And then I go to persistence, and I apologize, and I say, I'm sorry, because here's what it means. Here's the significance to our company, to our reputation, and here are some ideas I have to start making it right. Will you help me? What if my kids came to me because they threw a baseball? Instead of just saying, well, the baseball went through the neighbor's window. What if they came to me and said, I feel horrible. Here's what happened. I'm so sorry. And I'm thinking of some ways to make it right. Will you help me?

**Dolph Goldenburg:** And I agree with you. It's interesting. I mean, one of the things I think back on is very early in my career, I missed a grant deadline across the organization. Not a ton of money. It costs like \$10,000, but instead of trying to hide it, I actually walked into my executive director's office and was like, I messed up. I missed this grant deadline. I realized that it was yesterday. I thought it was today. Here's what I'm doing to make sure that I don't miss deadlines in the future. I've double checked grant calendar. I'm going to update it on a weekly basis, etc. While the ED was not happy, I think the ED probably thought it was a cheap lesson in part because it was only a \$10,000 grant. Now, it might've been A different conversation if there was a million-dollar grant, but it was a \$10,000 one.

**Nate Regier:** No, it's a great example because you practiced what we call failing forward. You knew that you were okay. You were capable, and you were accountable, and you acted as if that was true. You didn't come in saying, oh, I don't know what I did. I screwed up so bad, you know, kick me. I don't know what to do. I'm such a loser. You were able to maintain your dignity and take responsibility at the same time. I want to check this with you because you do a lot of work with this is, I think one of the biggest problems with the conflict is they don't come clean about their motives. They hold their cards tight, and they argue about stuff, and they want stuff, and they disagree with stuff, but they never really get honest about what really is this about for me? What am I trying to get out of this that I might feel embarrassed telling anybody or do I not think they'll care? But it's really what's driving me, and they just come clean.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** I think it's that. But I also think it's sort of like the movie. Do you remember the black and white movie, 12 Angry Men? It's all about 12 guys on a jury. I also think that's sort of the way boards are. They get into a room. They really don't know each other, and if they've not really formed a sense of who they are and a sense of team, it's really difficult to navigate conflict.

**Nate Regier:** It is, and you know, Lencioni's work and others have said we have to create a safe place where we trust each other first in order to do conflict. That's why we always say started open because openness is where we get vulnerable, and that sends the message that I'm not here to hurt you. What you bring to me, I'm going to take it for what it is and not judge you, and I'm going to give you the same privilege.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Absolutely. Now let me say, help some folks out here. Let's say we've got some listeners that are thinking to themselves how this makes a lot of sense and want to try this with their supervisor or with my board, but either they have not had a good experience in the past or they are just not confident and are afraid of doing it. What words of wisdom do you have to help them move from bad experience in the past or just not confident to being able to do this effectively?

**Nate Regier:** I'd love to say get my book.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** That's fair. Totally fair.

**Nate Regier:** I'll make a shameless plug. There's no way in 15 or 20 or 30 minutes, I can help someone who has had bad experiences, correct that in their head. I think somebody would need a little bit more examples, a little bit more, *see how it works*, and that's where the book is just really specific. It takes you chapter by chapter where it helps people build their own open, resourceful, persistent open statement. We call it ORPO. There's even an appendix in the book that says Building Your ORPO Bank, and it gets people ready for those conversations and guides them on what to write, and it has the practice and practice. By the end of the book, if somebody reads it, they will have some really good ideas of what to say that they could practice and say to themselves and practice with their spouse before they do it,

**Dolph Goldenburg:** You're a clinical psychologist. I was a social worker once upon a time, and when I do interims, the people who work with me get tired of this, but I'm a real big fan of roleplaying. If there's something I'm not comfortable with, it is always better for me to roleplay with somebody and say, okay, can you do this role? I'll do that role, and then let's reverse and see how it feels on both ends of it. Then when I have to do it in real life tomorrow, I feel better about it.

**Nate Regier:** Absolutely. Being able to practice like that in a, in a laboratory where the risk is lower is a great way to build confidence.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** I think it's also a good way to kind of fine tune what you're trying to say. It might sound really good in your head, but then as it's coming out of your mouth you're like, ah, I don't love that. How else could I phrase this?

**Nate Regier:** And sometimes people will say, okay, if I forget everything you said, if there's just one thing to remember, what is it? And I would say if you do nothing else, start at open and take the risk to reveal your motives and let people know how you feel. Most people are so scared of doing that because they're afraid. What if I get rejected or what if that person doesn't take me seriously? And what I say to them is, that's not why you do it. You do it because you matter and because your needs matter, and they deserve to be spoken. What other people do with them is up to them, and it doesn't define you. However, if you really want to engage somebody in struggling with you, tell them what's really going on. They can't help you if they don't know what's really going on.

I'm sorry, my daughter was five years old. I couldn't get her to bed, power struggle after power struggle every single night, and I felt so helpless as a dad. I felt like she didn't respect me. I couldn't make her go to bed, and my wife thought I was weak, and finally, I said, why don't I just get honest with her? And I finally told her, I said, Asha, I feel desperate because I don't know what else to do, and I don't want to force you or get into a power struggle because that's not how I want our relationship to be. I said, do you have any ideas? And she's like, give me a few minutes, Dad. She actually figured out how to put herself to sleep at five years old because she got to be part of the solution, and I was so scared admitting to her that I didn't know what to do and like giving up all my power.

What I did is I gained her as an ally, and she, since that day she knows how to put herself to sleep. Now, no more power struggles.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** You've got to share with us, what is their secret to putting yourself to sleep?

**Nate Regier:** To this day, I'm not so sure because she does it on her own. I know that there some songs when she was younger, she'd sing songs. I know that she moves around in her bed. She likes to tussle right before bedtime. It calms her down actually. She's one of those kids that is pretty hyper, and she likes activity, and it gets her to calm down. She does her best when she knows that there's no structure. It's her thing. Maybe not for everybody, but that's what she

does.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** That is interesting is there are people who thrive with no structure.

**Nate Regier:** Oh yeah, very much. And the more you try to force them, the more they will resist.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Absolutely. Now, Nate, I want to make sure that we have time for the Off-the-Map question. I always like to ask people a question that is tangentially related or not at all related to the topic that we talked about. I think I've got a pretty good Off-the-Map question and believe it or not, I have nothing to do with Africa, although I'm tempted. I'm really tempted.

**Nate Regier:** I can't wait.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Do you think that your high school classmates would be surprised by the work you do today and why?

**Nate Regier:** I think they would be pleasantly surprised, but not shocked because in high school I think I was pretty manipulative in my efforts to try to avoid conflict because I still was committed to not being violent, but I didn't have more mature skills. I think they would say, he continued on his path, but he found a way to grow up and do it. I was a pacifist, and I've always been one, and I've never violated that. So yeah, pleasantly surprised but not shocked.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Nate, thank you for taking the time to talk with us today. Your ideas are thought-provoking and relevant, especially since right now our entire society feels locked in conflict. As an aside, we're taping this in June and for 20 minutes this morning, CBS news talked about the kids being separated from their parents, and I remember thinking, I'm so glad I'm about to talk with Nate about skills and dealing with conflict because I feel very conflicted right now. Especially at this time in our society, I think this conversation is really timely. I want to be sure that our listeners know where to find your book and how to contact you. Your most recent book *Conflict without Casualties: A Field Guide for Leading with Compassionate Accountability* is available at [www.next-element.com](http://www.next-element.com). Once again, that's [www.next-element.com](http://www.next-element.com). You can also get the compassionate accountability personal development kit and learn about Nate's trainings known as Leading Out of Drama, and you can find out about those on [www.next-element.com](http://www.next-element.com). I bet you can probably even get some contact information for him there as well. Hey Nate, thank you so much for joining us today.

**Nate Regier:** You're so welcome, and I really appreciate the privilege of being able to be with your audience talking about conflict. I believe that misuse of conflict might be the biggest energy crisis in our world, and we can start chipping away at that.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** I love that. Thank you.

If you were feeling conflicted about finding a pen and paper versus typing it on your phone versus hanging on to every last word of that conversation with Nate, you might be like, oh my gosh, I got some drama. I don't remember his URL. Well, don't worry. You can go to our URL [www.successfulnonprofits.com](http://www.successfulnonprofits.com), and we will have a link to his book, to his training course and of course, to his website. Now, would you like a weekly email every Friday from me that shares what I've been working on? It'll tell you about the podcast that week, the blog post, that bonus break, occasional polls I use every now and again. If you just said, heck yeah, then please, before you move on with your busy day, take a minute to sign up for email blast at [www.successfulnonprofits.com](http://www.successfulnonprofits.com) or the [www.goldenburgggroup.com](http://www.goldenburgggroup.com). That is our show for this week. I hope you gained insight to help your nonprofit thrive in a competitive environment.

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