KEEP THE DRAMA IN FRONT OF THE CAMERA!

CONFLICT RESOLUTION FOR FILM & TV

KEN ASHDOWN & HELENE ARTS
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PREFACE

If you’re reading this book as a preventive measure and for personal or professional development, congratulations on your proactivity, foresight, and leadership. We strongly believe it will pay dividends for years to come, at least in terms of your peace of mind and perhaps your career trajectory. Depending on your level of industry experience, some of the content in the introductory portion of the book, describing the history and costs of conflict in the business, may seem familiar (perhaps uncomfortably so!), and you can safely skim over it. For relative newcomers, our aim is not to frighten or discourage you, but to provide a realistic view of life in a competitive and occasionally intense industry.

If you’re reading it because you’re currently embroiled in a conflict, stop right now and turn immediately to the practical, problem-solving skills explained in Part Three: Essential Conflict Prevention and Resolution Skills. You can come back to the introduction and the more theoretical sections later, once you’ve got a handle on your current situation.

In either case, make sure you do come back and read the other sections, because they provide valuable context and insight into how conflicts get started in the first place and how they escalate. There you will also learn other important aspects of conflict theory to help you prevent and manage conflicts more effectively over the long term. Note the use of the term “manage,” which is an important distinction, because not all conflicts can be resolved, but they can almost certainly be managed.
Whether or not you are ultimately responsible for the issue (or the people involved) in your current role, the tools and techniques described herein will allow you to deal with it in a way that will at least limit the physical and emotional energy you might otherwise need to invest in the conflict.

Between them, the authors have worked in the creative industries (including entertainment and high tech) for over thirty years, and, more specifically, we have been developing filmmakers and animators (among other artists and crafts persons) since 2002. In that time, we have witnessed the terrible tolls taken on production teams and individual careers, many of which have been hobbled or effectively ended by conflict. We have worked with hundreds of individuals, organizations, and teams whose workplaces and family members have suffered unnecessarily because of conflict that was either managed poorly or not at all. We have yet to meet anyone working in the field who does not have horror stories to share from working on set or in another area of the film and television business. Every one of them also told us that a book like this one would be a much-needed and welcome resource. We were only too happy to oblige, even if we were dismayed by the necessity of writing it.

We believe that movies and television are not only a reflection of our society but also a strong influence on it, one that is itself informed and shaped by the forces at work during the act of creation. When conflict intrudes, it can impact both the artistic and commercial success of the finished product, and it can have a deeper, more insidious effect on the broader culture. Our goal in writing this book (as with others in the series) is to provide a practical, step-by-step guide to help those in the industry reduce the frequency and intensity of conflicts by addressing the unique ways in which conflict can manifest in the making of filmed entertainment. If the book can help “keep the drama in front of the camera” where it belongs, more entertainment can be produced by happier, less stressed-out people, and then perhaps that positive energy will filter out to the audience and beyond.
WHOM THIS BOOK IS FOR

The entertainment industry is built on relationships. Perhaps more than most businesses, it’s not necessarily what you know that makes you successful in film or television, so much as who you know. Agents, casting directors, writers, producers, directors, studio personnel – all rely on the strength of their connections to get their script into the right hands, to attach talent to a project, to package a project, or to take a pitch meeting. Each production is an ad hoc network organization that comes together for the purpose of creating a specific show or series, only to be disbanded promptly once principal photography is done, and then perhaps reassembled in a different configuration for a future show. The trick is to ensure that you remain among those who consistently get called to work on a show. That requires a minimum standard of professionalism, a sufficiently pleasant personality, and ideally the ability to deal effectively with conflicts if or when they arise. Despite appearances, very few are those who can still land roles despite a history of difficult behaviour, especially in the formative stages of their career.

Unfortunately, the film and television industry also lends itself to friction. It faces a confluence of challenges that is rare in other industries. First, there’s the issue of heightened time sensitivity in the production phase. Principal photography on a feature often takes place in as little as fifteen or thirty days, whereas a “long” production schedule may take as many as ninety. On episodic television, that time scale is compressed even
further. Relative to businesses that produce consumer products or services on a routine, ongoing basis, this creates unparalleled urgency to resolve conflict situations quickly. In-demand actors or other key creatives may be contractually bound to wrap their work by a hard deadline so they can be free to work on their next scheduled project. The strain of these tight timelines can also contribute to conflict.

Second, and equally pressing, is the financial strain. With every tick of the clock, a tremendous sum of money is potentially wasted if a production is brought to a standstill for any reason. There are enough variables already: exterior shoots are subject to the forces of nature, and weather doesn’t always cooperate. Nor do animal actors, or planes flying through local airspace, or a host of other annoyances that can delay production. Multiple takes are par for the course, and technical glitches are usually taken in stride, but interpersonal conflicts are as unpredictable as they are destabilizing. That many are also preventable makes them all the more frustrating.

Third, a professional film or TV set can be strictly hierarchical in a way that many contemporary businesses are not. The rigidity of the pecking order can vary greatly, but, generally, the higher the production budget, the more strictly the hierarchy is maintained. Not entirely without reason, audiovisual production remains very much a vertically oriented, command-and-control type of setup, with most of the power and authority vested in the top tiers (typically the producer and director, as per Figure 1).
This is in contrast to industries other than film and television, where the trend over the last few decades has been to flatten organizations, or at least to make them more matrix-like, allowing for greater cross-functional collaboration, communication, decision-making equality, and accountability.

Finally, there’s the complexity of productions that are either unionized, non-unionized, or a blend of union and non-union labour, all of which are subject to their own rules and regulations (or lack thereof), which can vary depending on the jurisdiction in which the production is shooting. And when child actors are involved, studio teachers and health and safety monitors must look after the welfare of any minors in the cast, again depending on the jurisdiction in which filming takes place. Each of these situations requires filmmakers to adhere to an array of confusing and sometimes contradictory set of rules and regulations.

Together these factors make conflict prevention and resolution in the film and television industry that much trickier. In short, there are enough external threats to the industry, like piracy, market fragmentation, and cable TV cord-cutting, without having to worry about internal issues resulting from conflict.

Therefore, we wrote this book for people in every facet of the film and
TV business who deal with these and other challenges, individually or collectively, on a regular basis. This includes both the “creatives” and the so-called “suits” (a questionable distinction that will be tackled in a subsequent work-in-progress). The book is also intended for the agents, financiers, insurers, or anyone else with whom filmmakers might come into contact – including their loved ones. May it be equally useful whether you experience the conflicts directly or indirectly.

Its purpose is to help you, your cast and crew – or your producer, distributor, network exec, publicist, etc. – not only survive conflict relatively unscathed, but also make it work for you wherever possible. As we’ll suggest, well-managed conflict can provide a valuable and perhaps necessary contribution to the creative process. It’s only when conflict goes unmanaged, or is managed poorly, that it devolves into a destructive force.

Realistically, it's not a matter of if conflict will happen, but when. Conflict is inevitable, because even the most skilled and willfully independent among us can't work in total isolation forever. Every auteur still needs their crew to bring the vision to the big screen.

You may want or need to read this book if you are experiencing any or all of these issues (simply substitute “cast and crew” or “coworkers” with “significant other” or “family members” if you’re not in the biz yourself):

- trouble communicating effectively with cast and crew members
- crew being secretive or withholding information
- frequent groundless arguments and/or displays of insensitivity towards colleagues
- colleagues taking unreasonably rigid positions in disagreements
- unfair or unwarranted criticism directed at one or more crew members
- relations between crew members becoming noticeably frosty or stiff and formal

These are just some of the many symptoms of possible conflict on your set or wherever you might work in the industry. If conflict is present, this book can help you deal with it more effectively and maintain the relationship(s) while reducing your stress and anxiety levels. If you’re one of the few lucky ones to have managed to avoid conflict so far, this book will help you keep it that way by applying effective conflict prevention strategies.
Before proceeding, we need to offer a disclaimer. In our consulting work we must assure our clients of the utmost in confidentiality. Aside from some of the well-documented, historical cases presented here, the examples we offer in this book are not based on particular people or incidents and are highly fictionalized. They may be drawn from real-life experience, but they are mostly amalgamations of a variety of situations we have encountered. We have taken liberties with the specifics but have tried to stay as true as possible to the underlying principles, concepts, or causal factors in an effort to present realistic scenarios. In all cases names have been changed to protect identities.

A final word of caution before we begin: It’s tempting to dismiss conflict, or at least one person’s unwanted behaviour, as the product of “ego.” We often hear about a star’s or director’s egocentricities in the media. Beware of oversimplifications. Like any generalization, labels don’t help uncover the real root cause of a conflict or identify possible solutions. They’re just another way to objectify people, to dehumanize and see them as “other,” which is a good way to prolong or escalate a conflict. In Part Two, where we analyze the roles of feelings, needs, and strategies in conflict, we’ll learn what’s really behind ostensibly ego-driven behaviour and decode that information to manage or resolve conflict.

A key purpose of this book is to make sure that you can take the necessary steps to minimize the likelihood that a conflict will devolve into a destructive, personal attack, or worse. Even if the other party never learns or utilizes the tools and techniques contained in this book, you can still guide them towards a more satisfactory outcome. You hold the power in your hands.
A Brief History of Conflict in Film & TV

If you’re reading this, chances are you’ve already discovered that one of filmmaking’s greatest joys is also one of its most frustrating challenges: it is necessarily a collaborative endeavor. There is really no way to avoid working with other people. Even a minimalist, micro-budgeted guerrilla shoot requires a small production team comprising a director, cinematographer, actor, and maybe a boom operator or gaffer. Assuming the writer-director doubles as the editor and director of photography, and if all other participants are wearing multiple, hyphenated hats, there’s still no getting around the fact that it’s a group effort.

As budgets increase, factor in additional personnel, like producers, assistant directors, production managers, grips, hair and makeup, wardrobe, craft services, and other departments and roles. That’s without considering productions with multiple units. By the time we get to visual effects and the titles, a small army of talented collaborators has been assembled. From pre-production to principal photography through to post, the number of creatives involved in a given film or TV show is potentially in the thousands. And then there are studio executives, investors, distributors, marketing and publicity people…. From indie to major, and from Bollywood to Hollywood, there is always potential for conflict in film and television.
As they say in negotiation circles, it takes everyone to say yes and only one person to say no. The happiest and most harmonious of productions can still run the risk of an occasional difficult situation because there will always be differing ideas, perspectives, jobs or roles, goals and objectives, beliefs, opinions, or values, just to name a few of the things about which people can passionately disagree. It’s a normal part of human nature. Everyone wants the best for the picture; they just don’t always agree on what that means.

The stakes can be high. In the film and TV industry, perhaps more than in any other, time is money. Idle moments on a film or TV set can literally cost tens of thousands of dollars, and with production budgets on studio tent-pole pictures now frequently surpassing the USD $100 million mark, the pressure on all involved can be intense. A “cheap” indie film (by 2016 standards) can still spend five million dollars or more on the basics. That’s a lot of pressure, especially when folks are mortgaging their houses or maxing out their credit cards to finance the picture.

We see and hear evidence of conflict in film and television in the tabloids or on TMZ every day, so it might be redundant to delve into a history of conflict in film and TV here. But it’s worth remembering that conflict in the business has been with us as long as there has been a moving picture industry, and much of it transpires behind the scenes too. Although the highest profile conflicts tend to involve above-the-line talent, there are often issues within below-the-line departments, or between the writer(s), production designers, or other pre-production collaborators. Our company has worked with postproduction special visual effects houses to resolve issues there too. What, you might ask, can possibly go wrong when artists are silently and intently focused on their computer screens, modeling or texturing CGI animated characters or props? You might be surprised. In our experience, no area is immune to interpersonal problems.

Behind-the-scenes conflict in film and TV comes in many sizes and shapes. Most famous (or infamous) are those struggles occurring between directors and actors while in production. In many cases the former allegedly subject the latter to verbal abuse, excessive repeated takes, and forms of bullying or harassment. A quick Google search for examples of on- and off-set clashes turns up dozens of results. These include Alfred Hitchcock vs. Tippi Hedren in *The Birds*; Stanley Kubrick vs. Shelley Duvall and Scatman Crothers in *The Shining*; David O. Russell vs. George Clooney (during *Three...*
Kings), Lily Tomlin (on I Heart Huckabees), and James Caan (Nailed); Michael Bay vs. Megan Fox in Transformers; Sydney Pollack vs. Dustin Hoffman in Tootsie, and many, many more. Often these episodes are explained (or justified) retrospectively by the directors as attempts to create a realistic atmosphere or provoke a desired reaction from the actors onscreen. Whether this is truth or self-serving PR spin is a matter of speculation. Either way, people experienced real human emotions – some of them very unpleasant indeed. Some situations might even fall into the category of bullying and harassment, which are at the extreme end of a scale of emotional distress that we’ll examine in the theoretical underpinnings of conflict resolution in Part One.

Conflicts aren’t confined to directors and actors, of course. There have been instances where screenwriters have clashed with other writers. One of the most fascinating collaborations was the long, successful, but tempestuous relationship between the chalk-and-cheese duo of Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett. Despite their many personal and professional differences – and public feuding – they somehow coauthored many films that were critical or commercial hits, or both. A large percentage of them are now regarded as all-time classics, such as Sunset Boulevard, Ninotchka, and The Lost Weekend. It may be hard to believe that the late, great comic actor Garry Shandling was anything other than universally loved, at least judging by the tributes that poured in following his untimely passing in early 2016. But his writing partner on It’s Garry Shandling’s Show, Alan Zweibel, told Variety that the relationship "was not easy. In fact, after our show ended, we were hardly speaking — the unfortunate result of two strong personalities growing resentful of the same traits that drew them together in the first place."1 Eventually, after years of not talking to each other, Shandling and Zweibel patched things up, but it demonstrates that even some of the most generous and esteemed colleagues can fall prey to conflict.

Actors have warred with fellow actors over the years. An equally long-running (and very public) alleged feud took place over many years between Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, although there is some question whether some of it was manufactured for the benefit of the media (and, ultimately,

the careers of the stars themselves). There were reports of tension manifesting between co-stars Sarah Jessica Parker and Kim Cattrall on the set of *Sex and the City 2*, and battles between Debra Winger and Shirley MacLaine on *Terms of Endearment*. As this is being written, Vin Diesel and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson are making headlines with some sort of feud on the set of the eighth instalment of the *Fast & Furious* franchise. Tantrums by movie stars are legend; in the Internet era, it's hard to ignore outtakes that go viral on YouTube or Facebook after a star goes ballistic. You’re probably thinking of at least one or two famous episodes right now. Exactly why these happen is sometimes hard to ascertain, but they still do, despite ever-present public scrutiny.

Conflict is not limited to the creatives, especially when art intersects with commerce. Money can be an emotionally charged topic, and arguments between directors and their producers, or directors and studio executives, are legion. Director Terry Gilliam took on Universal Pictures over *Brazil*, going so far as to take out a full-page ad in the press to take the studio to task over the release of the film. Richard Donner fought Warner Bros. and producers Alexander and Ilya Salkind over *Superman II*. Other well-documented examples include Orson Welles vs. Universal over *Touch of Evil*, Francis Ford Coppola vs. Paramount on *The Godfather*; and Kevin Reynolds vs. Universal over the trouble-plagued *Waterworld*.

All of these make for sensational reading in the press or online. A more nuanced and revealing perspective can sometimes be had by watching movies about movie-making; at a meta level, these films often provide rare insight into the behind-the-scenes filmmaking challenges. *Lost in La Mancha*, for example, tells the story of director Gilliam’s ill-fated retelling of the Don Quixote story, which was marred by many issues including interpersonal conflict. Likewise, *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker’s Apocalypse* is a documentary about the many struggles involved in the making of Coppola’s classic *Apocalypse Now*, as told by his wife, filmmaker and writer/artist Eleanor Coppola. In it, conflict both on and off the set was an occasional feature. *Lost Soul: The Doomed Journey of Richard Stanley’s Island of Dr. Moreau*, on the other hand, chronicles the slow-motion train wreck of a film constantly beset with conflicts. Werner Herzog’s *My Best Friend* is another fascinating documentary, about the director’s often strained but highly successful relationship with actor Klaus Kinski, which nearly ended in violence on the set of the critically acclaimed *Fitzcarraldo*. No doubt you
may have your own favorites to add to this list, and we invite your submissions (you can join the conversation online at www.facebook.com/KeepTheDramaInFrontOfTheCamera).

While this book focuses on interpersonal issues, labour-management disputes are another common manifestation of conflict in the industry. Given the significant number, size, and power of the various unions and guilds in the industry, there is potential for large-scale disruption. Nearly a century ago, in 1919, some of the biggest stars of the day, including D.W. Griffith, Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks, founded their own United Artists studio in order to free themselves from the perceived tyranny of the major Hollywood studios. The resulting shift in the traditional power dynamic can still be felt in the industry today. Lengthy strikes by members of the Writers Guild of America in 1988 and 2007-8 wound up costing the industry — and the local Los Angeles economy — hundreds of millions of dollars in lost wages, taxes, and revenues. Issues in the latter dispute included DVD residuals and payments for new media, such as Internet reuse and transmission. As both the technology and business continue to evolve, so will the opportunities for disagreement.

Of the many changes in technology that have impacted the industry over the years, some have resulted in the elimination of traditional roles in film and TV. This has caused discord of its own, and the removal of entire layers of workers hasn’t necessarily made navigating working relationships any easier. New skill sets, processes, and people have simply replaced the ones that have been removed. The one skill set that hasn’t gone the way of the dodo — and never will, as long as there are human beings who need to live and work together — is the ability to prevent and manage conflict effectively.

The Good News: What We Get from Film & TV

Film and television play a vital role in our economy and in our culture. It’s a multi-billion-dollar industry that employs hundreds of thousands around the world in production, distribution, and exhibition. Movies can make us laugh, cry, or think, sometimes all in the course of the same two hours. They can inspire us. They provide an affordable means of escape when times are tough (given historical viewing patterns, the movies are said to be a recession-proof industry). Movies and TV can express our greatest
hopes and fears, our dreams and anxieties, our triumphs and our tragedies. Documentaries can be powerful catalysts for change and a force for social justice. Great audiovisual entertainment can bring people together in a way that sports, with its competitive and often nationalistic nature, simply can’t.

Clearly, few of the productions cited earlier have suffered noticeably at the box office, either as a direct or indirect result of conflict. For all those that have been negatively affected, either financially or creatively (or both), the shows that do manage to overcome internal problems have no doubt benefited from effective conflict resolution, with the creative chemistry repaired or even enhanced. And not every collaboration is rife with issues. Joe Weisberg and Joel Fields, the showrunners (writer-producers) behind the multiple Emmy-nominated FX spy series *The Americans*, have a congenial and highly functional collaboration, even though their pairing was originally the result of a sort of arranged marriage, thanks to the network and studio. The success of their working relationship is perhaps because the two purposefully sat down and laid the groundwork for their partnership beforehand. As we’ll discuss later in Part Two, negotiating the terms of any collaboration – including (or especially) the behaviours, norms, and role expectations, and not just the financial or legal aspects – is always a good idea before proceeding too far down the road.

Even when conflict does exist on a production, it can actually be a positive, productive force for creativity – provided it’s managed well, of course. A growing body of research suggests that it’s easier to rally teams around a particular decision or motivate them in a given direction when that choice has been hard-fought and won through vigorous debate, dialogue, and discussion. That’s because those involved feel more confident that the winning idea has been truly battle-tested, examined from all angles, and agreed upon to be the most robust solution, precisely because it’s been subjected to such intense scrutiny. We call this “productive conflict” because the end result is positive and creative. So despite the bleak picture you may have drawn from reading up to this point, the news is not all negative. There is much to appreciate about film and television when it comes to conflict and how it’s handled.

**The Bad News: What We Don’t Get from Film & TV**

For all the benefits they bring to the world, film and television do us a
tremendous disservice. Set aside, for the moment, the controversies surrounding diversity (or the lack thereof), sexism, and ageism in the industry. Never mind the stylized violence and gore, the gratuitous sex (and sexual objectification of women), the endless remakes and reboots, or other complaints commonly expressed about the content of movies. Ignore the fact that (in Hollywood pictures, at least) all the characters have perfect teeth, or the hero almost always gets the girl in the end. There is another pervasive and more insidious reason that movies and television create unrealistic audience expectations, and it has to do with one of the first rules of storytelling every filmmaker learns in school: *Show, don’t tell.*

It’s only natural, because film is a visual language, that we let the camera do the talking. For economy’s sake, audiences always join the action *in medias res,* very little back story is told, and it’s usually limited to quick vignettes. There is always a direct cause-and-effect relationship onscreen; what you see is what you get, and A inevitably leads to B. The audience can only understand the character’s intentions and motivations based on what unfolds onscreen. The problem is that the audience only ever sees things from the protagonist’s point of view, because of course the goal is to sympathize with him or her. Sometimes there’s exposition – for example, when the evil villain patiently explains his diabolical plan to the hero just at the big dramatic climax. Or there may be the occasional flashback or some other clichéd plot device to help the audience understand something that’s happened offscreen, or to provide insight into a character’s psychological makeup. But we seldom get much insight into any character’s mind or motives other than the lead’s, and we certainly don’t get much of that in real life either.

Even when the camera is omniscient, offering the audience a more all-encompassing view, we still get a simplified picture of reality, one that often relies on stereotypes. In the classic westerns, the villain always wears the black hat. Life is seldom as neat and clean as movies would have us believe; it’s usually a lot more nuanced than films or TV shows could ever be. Real people, in particular, are much more multidimensional than the characters are usually portrayed onscreen. Few are purely virtuous or purely evil, and most of us are somewhere in between.

So we have two main issues:

First, *we can’t always accept everything at face value.* Things aren’t always what they seem. Despite what the movies teach us, reality is infinitely more
complex. Just because we feel hurt by something another person might say or do, it doesn’t mean they necessarily meant to hurt us; it just feels that way. We have to stop assuming we know what the other person is or was thinking or feeling based solely on what our limited perceptions tell us.

Theory of mind, a concept which is crucial to movie-making, is the notion that human beings can at least imagine what other people are thinking or feeling in a given situation. We might be able to put ourselves in their shoes, but we can’t know for sure what’s going on in their heads unless we ask, and we get an honest, accurate response. Instead we tend to rely on our assumptions. Someone who laughs, cries, or lashes out at another person onscreen usually does so in direct response to the action immediately preceding it. Real life doesn’t always work like that. Another person’s laughter, tears, or anger may have nothing to do with us; we might simply be in the right place at the wrong time. Maybe they were recently fired from their job, or broke up with their significant other, or just remembered a funny joke. We don’t always get the benefit of exposition, or a flashback that helps us connect the original inciting incident to the reaction. We never get to see everything going on behind the scenes but we still think we get the full picture. Needless to say, our faulty assumptions are a major contributing factor in conflict.

Second, there’s more than one side to any story. We’re raised on the classic fairy tale paradigm that every movie has a clear hero, a victim, and villain. Sometimes the hero is also the victim, or vice versa, but these three roles are represented in every story. If one character is the protagonist, it follows that the other must naturally be the antagonist. In the movies, the latter can sometimes take the form of aliens, or robots, or Mother Nature, but it’s always clear who the Bad Guy is. You already know it’s never the main character. So when we find ourselves in conflict, we tend to adopt the paradigm and cast ourselves as the avenging hero because we’re the main character in our own lives. That means the other person is automatically cast as the villain of the story. If both parties to a conflict filmed their own versions of the story, we’d have two very different movies told from two perspectives, with both casting the other as the bad guy and themselves as the hero or the victim. Both of these contain truth, and neither do.
The Costs of Conflict

You know that a single minute wasted on a film or TV production can mean hundreds, perhaps thousands, of dollars lost. When there’s a dispute or a blow-up on set, the producer (or production manager, or AD) typically springs into action to try to resolve matters while the clock is ticking. These surprisingly commonplace events add up and eventually fall to the production and/or studio’s bottom line.

Intractable union-management labour relations can be very expensive too. In 1988, the longest strike ever by the film and TV unions and guilds lasted nearly six months. In that time the U.S. entertainment industry was estimated to have lost the equivalent of half a billion dollars in opportunity costs, and while reports of the strike’s cost to the larger Los Angeles economy varied, the National Public Radio (NPR) network set the loss at around $1.5 billion.

The business has had its share of major lawsuits filed as a result of mismanaged or unmanaged conflict. Some of the more sensational cases involve outright harassment, which is technically not conflict per se but generates extreme levels of pain and suffering, as we’ll explain in Part One. It’s also terribly expensive. Ample evidence is found in situations such as the Fox News sexual harassment scandal, which is still unraveling as this is written. Even as the story develops, the price tag keeps climbing; some estimates of the network’s total settlements already top the $100 million mark. Allegations are still being made about the cable outlet’s toxic corporate culture, so the amount could increase substantially before the dust settles.²

For every on-set or courtroom battle we hear about in the press, there are probably dozens more being fought that we never learn about because they take place away from the spotlight or under a nondisclosure agreement (NDA). The litigants may fear harm to their reputations if details are made public; they choose to settle out of court; or the parties aren’t as high profile or newsworthy. Either way, there are many reasons why it can be hard to determine the true costs of conflict. The invisible, interpersonal issues that can plague individuals, creative teams, and workplaces are hard

to count, and their costs are harder still to estimate accurately. Those day-to-day conflicts that are poorly handled (or completely unmanaged) could be just as expensive in the long run as the lawsuits, perhaps more. Though their costs are not as obvious, nor as easy to assess, they nonetheless take a heavy toll on the industry and its people.

Consider absences due to stress and related health issues. Studios, production companies, crews, actors and agents—to name a few major categories of those affected—all suffer to varying degrees from absenteeism, a significant amount of which can be attributed either directly or indirectly to conflict in the workplace. One individual’s unwillingness or inability to deal with another at work might cause them to call in sick just to avoid the conflict. Or the absence might be the result of physical symptoms such as headaches, nausea, or other stress-related illness or injury. Anxiety and sickness have knock-on effects, because they also impact the coworkers of those who are ill or incapacitated, due to the stress of conflict. They may need to cover for the absent colleague, taking on extra responsibilities, which can then result in even more stress and anxiety.

Drug and alcohol abuse, common causes of absenteeism, may themselves be symptoms of conflict. Some people get high as a way to escape or dull the pain, and avoid having to deal with the reality of conflict. Thus we can also factor in the cost of treatments for addiction and the side effects of substance abuse. The expense of counselling to help overcome the fear and anxiety attached to a particular workplace conflict can be prohibitive, as can the cost of treating the physical symptoms of stress and anxiety as outlined above. Medical care, prescriptions, and physiotherapy all add up, whether the costs are covered by the individual or borne by an insurer.

Confusion or disruption of roles may not incur a direct financial cost, but can result in indirect losses. Affected team or department members might relinquish certain duties, tasks, or activities (either formally or informally) if they tend to lead to conflict. This may be less of an issue on large sets where the roles are highly specialized, clearly defined, and critically interdependent, but it could be a significant problem for smaller indie productions where creatives are wearing multiple hats. It is virtually guaranteed to happen in larger organizations such as studios, unions or guilds, agencies, and so on. Some conflicts might result in individuals being denied voting rights, or other power or privileges. Again, these actions
might be formally imposed or they might be covertly initiated by the other party (or parties) to the conflict.

Also at risk in conflict involving creatives is the quality of the work itself. On occasion, it may even be actively sabotaged or destroyed out of anger or frustration. Even though nothing ultimately came of it, extra security precautions were taken, at concomitant expense, to ensure that the set, cast, and crew of *The Island of Doctor Moreau* would be protected when Richard Stanley was released from directorial duties on the ill-fated production. A show beset by conflict may experience reduced productivity when it saps the cast and crew’s vital physical or emotional energy. There’s already enough hurry-up-and-wait fatigue on a typical film set without wasting further writing, rehearsal, shooting, or editing time due to conflict.

Not surprisingly, creative collaborations inevitably find their output diminished in all sorts of ways when faced with conflict. In addition to draining physical resources, conflict can impact artistic input. It can lead to the withholding of creative ideas, especially if someone fears conflict potentially arising from their contributions. Affected individuals might keep their best ideas to themselves and reserve them for future use if they believe they aren’t getting a fair hearing in the current situation. It’s hard to be focused, and loyal, when you’ve always got one eye on the door. Idea generation suffers, too. Every creative endeavor thrives on original concepts, or at least an interesting, original twist. But conflict can lead to unproductive or inefficient brainstorming when fear of judgment or censorship – by oneself or others – is rampant. These are just a few of the many ways creativity itself can suffer.

Even assuming good, creative input can be generated and shared in the midst of conflict, the quality of decisions may still be at risk. Inferior choices are often made in haste just to “get it over with” and stop the bickering. Or they may be made while one or more persons’ ideas are being withheld. In either case, the resulting decisions are bound to be short-lived, or subject to second-guessing. Equally questionable are those decisions made by one faction “ganging up” on another.

It’s worth noting that when managed productively, conflict can actually

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3 For a fascinating peek behind the scenes at the making of the troubled project, see the aforementioned *Lost Soul: The Doomed Journey of Richard Stanley’s Island of Dr. Moreau*, the 2014 documentary by David Gregory.
be crucial to getting the best quality decisions out of any group or team. We’ll examine the idea of healthy and productive conflict in due course. (For a wonderful primer on the subject, we recommend former BBC executive and film and television producer Margaret Heffernan’s TED Talk entitled “Dare to disagree.”\(^4\))

Meanwhile there are other dollars-and-cents costs to take into account where conflict is concerned. Replacement of personnel and the orientation of new hires is another significant expense. Recruitment, “on-boarding,” and training new hires all incur significant hard costs, over and above the lost momentum and productivity. Human Resources professionals can attest that it’s one of the most expensive HR processes undertaken by any organization, especially when new recruits don’t survive the probationary period. In those cases, the cycle simply repeats, and the costs mount. It takes time, effort, and patience to find and acculturate a new hire with just the right fit for the team, department, or organization. It’s often an unnecessary and entirely avoidable cost.

Looking further afield, there are social costs to conflict. The damage to relationships at home, in the community, or in the industry can be significant, if not easily tallied. Conflicts might originate inside the production, team, or organization, but they have a tendency of “leaking” out into other domains. Those affected may bring the stress and frustration of work home with them at the end of the day, where it manifests in family conflict. We call this the “wallpaper bubble effect,” and if you’ve ever tried to lay wallpaper, you know how it works: suppressing an air bubble under the wallpaper in one area only causes it to pop up elsewhere. A similar thing happens with anger or other emotions suppressed in a conflict; it’s hard to keep them from manifesting in other areas, including one’s primary/romantic relationship, at home, or in the community.

Tarnished reputations are a heavy price to pay for those in conflict. The film and TV business may employ thousands around the world, but it’s still a fairly closed shop. It’s no coincidence that the game “Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon” is based on the notion that everyone knows everyone else through one or more contacts. Word gets around the grapevine quickly. Cast, crew, or employees that have a history of conflict don’t make good candidates for the next gig. That said, the industry does seem to have a

\(^4\) http://www.ted.com/talks/margaret_heffernan_dare_to_disagree
surprisingly high tolerance for some individuals connected to a disproportionate share of conflicts. We probably all know of some “marquee” talent whose name recognition value tends to give them a pass for bad behaviour. For this reason, conflict may affect the lesser known lights more severely, but it catches up with everyone eventually.

We were somewhat surprised to learn, for example, that one hotly tipped young director straight out of film school left a trail of bitter cast and crew members after his debut studio production, and was subsequently hired to helm a TV series. The world-class crew on that first feature had rallied around him in support, knowing that he would be under tremendous pressure, but he quickly squandered that goodwill with his dictatorial style and confrontational approach. Regardless of why his TV series was greenlit after his early, unwelcome behaviour, the director will have a progressively smaller pool of experienced, professional talent to work with if this pattern continues.

In general, if not (yet) in this particular case, recurring destructive conflict signals that a person or organization is probably tough to work with. In a buyer’s market, it’s easier to bypass “difficult” actors or directors, etc., in favour of others that can either manage or resolve conflicts effectively. Thus, career limitation or failure is another by-product of conflict. A long history of conflicts can make it hard to get another job, but even a single, unresolved issue can limit one’s choices if the conflict is sufficiently severe. This might seem unlikely in the film business, where megastars can wield tremendous box office (and negotiating) power, but it happens. Companies with “revolving door syndrome” due to frequent personnel changes can also find it very difficult to attract or retain new employees, for similar reasons.

The loss of a single creative talent can be catastrophic. It’s bad enough in the music business; for every band like the Beatles, whose individual members go on to lucrative solo careers post-breakup, or the Rolling Stones, who have survived the replacement of several members over the years, there are countless others who struggle to recapture a fraction of their former financial or artistic glory. In the movie business, which is inherently a collaborative effort, the loss of a single creative participant can likewise portend disaster. This is because – and not despite – the fact that we are more interdependent.

As the famous case of writer-director Billy Wilder and cowriter Charles
Beckett illustrates, a team split can destroy the creative partnership’s unique chemistry. Theirs was just one collective genius that was effectively silenced when they were unable to work out their differences. With the end of their collaboration the pair seemed to lose the ability to make equivalent artistic and box office magic. As so often happens with genuine creative synergies, the whole proved to be greater than the sum of its parts. Such losses are felt at many levels, from the individuals involved to the studios that hire them.

Then there are the disappointed audiences. There’s only so much discord, or creative patchiness, that even the most rabid fan will tolerate from any studio, production company, or creative team. Eventually the conflict will start to impact their moviegoing experience. Real life will intrude, overshadowing the creative content. Fans move on and find other artists or franchises to follow, whether or not the team behind them actually breaks up. If the creative output suffers as a result of conflict, that’s one more reason fans might abandon a favorite series. The same is true for organizations: customers and clients will find another firm to do business with if the conflict trickles down to affect the quality of their product or service.

If left to fester, a situation will inevitably deteriorate, and when all civility breaks down, personal safety and security can be another casualty of conflict. Violence is not unknown in the industry, and it can happen on set as well as off.

By now we hope you are convinced that unresolved or poorly managed conflict will cost you significant money, time, relationships, reputation, and perhaps rob the world of some classic shows. It doesn’t have to be this way. If you deal with conflict the moment you suspect a problem – or better yet, if you learn how to take preventive measures and reduce the likelihood of eruptions in the first place – you dramatically increase the chances that matters will be resolved successfully. This means that the situation won’t get worse, you will save yourself lots of stress and anxiety, and the creativity will continue, if not flourish.

Another critical thing will happen when conflict is dealt with proactively: your fellow filmmakers (and those who live or work with them) will learn from the experience and grow. On a personal level, you will improve your conflict prevention and management skills. Like any other skill, conflict resolution gets better with practice. Eventually you will develop a reputation for your leadership skills, and for being a pleasant
professional collaborator. Given the choice of working with a production assistant, grip, or gaffer with strong technical knowledge but no people skills and one with less than complete knowledge but plenty of leadership skills, most people would prefer the latter. Who doesn’t want more opportunities?

Now you know why you will want to address conflict as soon as you realize something is amiss: the costs of not doing so are obvious and far too high. The personal, professional, and monetary risks are simply not worth it.

Our first priority, therefore, is to identify the underlying causes of conflict, and some of the signs that indicate it is time to act.
PART ONE: BASIC CONFLICT RESOLUTION THEORY

Learning outcomes: By the end of this section, you should have the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to

- distinguish between disagreement, conflict, and harassment/bullying;
- interpret conflict as a signal that something needs to change;
- recognize four warning signs of conflict (Emotional, Physical, Behavioural, and Relational);
- determine when it's appropriate to get help managing or resolving a conflict;
- assess and evaluate a conflict situation;
- distinguish between the types of conflict resolution assistance available; and
- locate a variety of resources available for assistance with conflict resolution.

The Difference Between Disagreement, Conflict,
and Bullying/Harassment

There are three terms that people tend to use interchangeably: disagreement, conflict, and harassment, and sometimes bullying (which is a form of harassment). Depending on how emotionally charged you are, you might use any one of these words to describe the current state of affairs. But it’s important to make a distinction, because the meaning of these terms will make a difference in how to deal with each situation most effectively.

To clarify these terms, we can place disagreement, conflict, and harassment on a continuum of pain or emotional distress, like the one in Figure 2:

Figure 2: The conflict continuum.

As we move from left to right along this continuum, the feelings get progressively more intense. It’s important to note that this is not a time line: situations that are normal or OK don’t necessarily become disagreements over time, disagreements don’t always become conflict, and conflict doesn’t eventually turn into harassment one hundred percent of the time. Of course this can and does happen, but only under certain conditions, which we’ll explain in due course. Remember, it’s a continuum of emotional discomfort, which means that a disagreement can be uncomfortable, but it doesn’t feel anywhere near as upsetting as actual conflict does. Even the latter’s very unpleasant feelings don’t compare to harassment or bullying, when people can experience a profound sense of violation and/or fear, extreme powerlessness, and other unpleasant emotions.

The reason it’s important to be able to differentiate between these states is because if you understand what has to happen in order for one state to lead to the next, then you can use that knowledge to prevent the current situation from devolving into something worse. If a disagreement is
not handled well, or at all, it can escalate into conflict, and a conflict that remains unresolved has the potential to turn into a harassment situation. Clearly, neither is desirable, but both outcomes are within your power to prevent.

On the far left of the continuum, when everything is OK between people (i.e., a normal, non-conflicted state), there is no problem with the relationship: conversations carry on as normal, and the level of emotional distress is at zero. When issues do arise, such as a tough decision, you usually try to work them out as soon as you can. It isn’t always easy or fun, but you try. If in the process of addressing the problem you find yourselves stuck but still fundamentally getting along, then that’s a disagreement. You might differ on an issue, but fundamentally the relationship is intact. The people involved may not see eye to eye, but they still like, trust, and respect each other. As the cliché goes, you simply agree to disagree. It’s nothing personal, just a difference of opinion, so there is very little (if any) emotional “heat” around the issue.

Conflict is a different, intensified state: You are in disagreement, but there is also something that has happened between you and the person(s) with whom you disagree. Depending on how serious that something is, your relationship has probably sustained damage; words have been exchanged that leave one or more of you hurting and feeling negatively towards each other. Trust is weakened. Respect is faltering. The situation has become personal, and emotions are running high(er). Commonly heard at the conflict stage include such familiar lines as these:

- “You betrayed me,”
- “You’ve ruined things,”
- “Obviously you don’t care,”
- “You never listen,”
- “You do this all the time,”
- “I don’t give a shit anymore,”
- “I’m getting sick of this,”
- “I’m so pissed off/hurt/disappointed/frustrated,” etc.

Conflict is a stronger emotional state than disagreement, so it rates higher on the continuum of emotional distress.

It’s important to distinguish here between dysfunctional, or destructive, conflict, and productive conflict (yes, there is such a thing!). The former is exactly what you might expect based on the name: it means individuals
aren’t cooperating or collaborating well, teams aren’t functioning properly, and things are probably falling apart. Productive conflict, on the other hand, is that which ultimately brings with it positive outcomes – assuming, of course, it never reaches the destructive stage, or, if it does, the situation can be salvaged.

The paradox of productive conflict is that teams, groups, or organizations that survive it often go on to be much more healthy and high-functioning, with trust levels even stronger than prior to the conflict. In the academic literature, group cohesion is positively correlated with team or group performance, and conflict resolution is positively correlated with group cohesion. In other words, the research indicates that productive conflict, and/or successful conflict resolution where dysfunctional conflict has occurred, likely contributes to better team, group, or organizational outcomes.

A more in-depth discussion of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this book, but the key is to understand that conflict per se is not necessarily bad, and it can in fact make a production or company even better if used consciously and managed well. The cohesiveness and trust are improved precisely because work has been done to surface previously unseen issues, feelings, and needs, and to resolve the situation effectively. This is not unlike some troubled marriages that go on to be even stronger and more loving if they can weather the occasional storms, perhaps undergoing counselling to improve communication and ensure the partners’ mutual care-taking.

Productive conflict also means that the best and most robust ideas or solutions to common creative challenges will emerge triumphant after lots of thorough examination, analysis, discussion, and even passionate debate. Such decisions are likelier to stick because the participants feel confident that all viewpoints have been heard, taken into account, weighed, and rigorously tested.

Harassment, like its variant bullying, takes conflict to a whole new (and more dangerous) level. Note that there doesn’t need to be a preexisting conflict, nor need there have been an initial disagreement between the parties. Instead, someone might have exhibited a behaviour that another finds offensive — for example, persistent jokes at someone else’s expense — and despite asking them several times to stop, the offensive behaviour continues. Perhaps one party is using social media to deliberately humiliate
or intentionally sabotage another’s reputation. Maybe someone has some secret information and is using that power to intimidate. Or it might be that someone has acted contrary to a law or policy, as is the case with discrimination or unwanted sexual advances.

Regardless of the specifics, harassment can be defined as some sort of violation of a person's basic human rights and dignity. If you are dealing with a situation at the harassment level, then please get help from someone with experience in this area who can give you the advice and support that you need. This person may be a professional of some kind or a wise and trusted friend or colleague — whatever works for you — but do get that help. (We'll cover when to get help, what kind to get, and where to get it, later in Part One.)

Returning to our continuum of emotional distress, you can see how each one of these states, from normal/OK through harassment/bullying, feels quite different, and each of these terms means something just as distinct.

Now that you know the terminology and the basic differences between these states, you have just increased your awareness of how to prevent a situation from deteriorating. In short, if you find yourself in a disagreement with someone, keep focused on the issue — that is, the problem that needs to be fixed. It’s never the person that needs to be fixed, no matter how much they may frustrate you – it’s their behaviour that needs to be fixed. The problem is not the individual themself, no matter how irritated or upset you feel, or how persistently you feel it. It’s what they’re saying or doing that can be changed, whereas people seldom change all that much without a lot of effort and sheer will. So never let it become personal! Avoid shifting the focus from what, to who. Once the parties begin talking about what’s wrong with each other, instead of discussing the reason for the original disagreement central to the conflict, they have just made things worse and much harder to resolve. The term for this is conflict escalation.

If preventing a situation from becoming personal sounds easier said than done, the subsequent sections of this book will give you many valuable tools and techniques you need to deal with disagreements more effectively when they arise. You will learn to keep disagreements from becoming personal and to prevent disagreements from escalating into conflicts. You will learn basic techniques and skills for resolving many different types of conflict and keeping most any situation from spiraling out of control.