



## THE LOVE, LOVE, LOVE, HATE SYNDROME

BY NOAH NUER

**P**erhaps the most prevalent dysfunction in companies (and other areas of our lives) is conflict avoidance. Many of us avoid conflict without giving it too much thought. Though we may think we should speak out about what is in the back of our minds, more often than not we are stopped by considerations such as, “Why create unnecessary problems?” “I’ll bring it up later,” “He’ll be crushed if I tell him that,” “I can’t say that to my boss,” “I just want my team to be happy.”

We all have good reasons for not speaking up. Why would we want to bring up problems when doing so makes us uncomfortable and could potentially create tension? The answer lies in a vicious cycle—what we might call the “Love, Love, Love, Hate Syndrome”—that produces damaging consequences to both the results and relationships we’re trying to create. Let’s look at some of the invisible outcomes of conflict avoidance and how to begin to overcome them.

### Love, Love . . .

In the short term, we prefer the apparent harmony and good feelings to the discomfort and possible reactions of others if we bring up our concern. We believe that not openly sharing our concerns with another party and not hearing his or her side of the story will have fewer, if any, consequences than if we actually talk about the problem. The reality is quite different, however. Not only does avoiding conflict make us feel powerless to affect the situation, but as we witness the problem growing—along with our discomfort—we silently build up resentment.

### . . . Love, Hate!

If we continue to pretend that everything is fine, the problem eventually

becomes too large or the failure too imminent, and suddenly we can no longer side-step the issue. The situation shifts dramatically, and all of the emotions we have accumulated over time come out with a disproportionate level of animosity toward the person with whom we feel in conflict. We then take drastic measures that can deeply scar the relationship we were trying to preserve.

The costs of this type of love-hate dynamic are significant not only to our interpersonal relationships but to the larger organization. A corporate culture steeped in conflict avoidance becomes an environment of insecurity. Everything seems fine on the surface, but is it really? What’s not being said? What do they really think? And when will the other shoe drop?

With any dysfunction, there are also benefits or we wouldn’t engage in the behavior. With conflict avoidance, when we pretend that everything is great, we look like a real team player, a boss people want to work for, and a loving parent. Who wouldn’t want to be regarded in that way? We all want to be liked and acknowledged.

The problem comes, however, when our desire to feel acknowledged becomes more important to us than our real goals. As such, conflict avoidance is less about our fear of hurting others than it is about protecting our own image. In the long run, though, by suppressing our true feelings until they explode, we actually create the opposite of what we want—for ourselves and others.

### Beyond Conflict Avoidance

Here are some tips to move beyond conflict avoidance—knowing that true change begins only once we have deeply and unconditionally decided to transform ourselves:

**1. Do Not Flip from Conflict Avoidance to Conflict Creation.** When we become aware of a behavior that doesn’t serve our needs and decide to change it, we often fall into the trap of doing the *opposite*. For example, if we have been avoiding conflict, we may suddenly think we should say everything that is on our mind. However, if we start to speak without a clear goal for the relationship and the situation, then we usually wind up exacerbating the conflict.

**2. Use DECC.** To successfully handle difficult situations, we need to overcome our fear of engaging in challenging conversations. One powerful approach to accomplishing this goal is called “Direct Emotional Constructive Conversations DECC).” In these conversations:

- Be **direct**—express your thoughts and feelings clearly to avoid confusing or misleading the other person.
- Be **emotionally** involved—accept that half of the message you convey will be infused with the feelings you experience, whether sadness or frustration.
- Be **constructive**—use the conversation as a starting point for improving the situation and the relationship.

When we practice DECC, we create an opportunity to overcome both our personal fears and the conflict we’re dealing with. By deciding to change the paradigm and taking steps to do so, we can break through many situations in which we previously felt powerless or dissatisfied, prevent tomorrow’s crises, and develop deep and trusting relationships. ■

**Noah Nuer** is a designer and facilitator of Learning as Leadership’s (LaL) programs. LaL trains leaders to achieve their next level through leadership-development workshops and coaching (visit [www.learnaslead.com](http://www.learnaslead.com)). Noah can be reached at [noah@learnaslead.com](mailto:noah@learnaslead.com).