

# From Clashing Oars to Gliding Boats: Mastering Conflict as a Team

*Popular media and modern culture often propagate a systemic fallacy: the idea that a "correct" relationship is one characterized by perpetual harmony. This misconception suggests that disagreement is a symptom of failure or an indication of an incompatible pairing. However, from a marriage systems perspective, conflict is an inevitable—and even healthy—byproduct of two unique individuals attempting to merge disparate backgrounds, personalities, and priorities into a single unit.*

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Optional study aid generated from thematically related research.

It reflects the source material, not U.S.M.C. Ministries doctrine — read it against the module.

## 1. Introduction: The Myth of the Conflict-Free Marriage

As Family Life Educators, we recognize that the primary "noise" in the marital system often stems from a fundamental human selfishness—the recursive tendency to prioritize one's own opinions and needs over the system's health. To move from a state of clashing oars to a gliding boat, a couple must transition from a competitive feedback loop to a synchronized rhythm. When each partner pulls their oar in a vacuum, attempting to prove they are the "better" contributor, the system lurches and fails. Progress only occurs when the couple stops competing and adopts a shared tempo, allowing the partnership to achieve systemic equilibrium and move forward in harmony.

## 2. Core Teachings: The Four Principles of Conflict Resolution

### Remember Positive Qualities

Maintaining a healthy atmospheric pressure within a marriage requires an intentional protocol of appreciation. Research by Professor John Gottman, who has spent over 40 years analyzing the habits of married couples, identifies the presence of mutual appreciation as a critical indicator of long-term stability. Even during high-intensity conflict, the system is protected when partners hold onto what they admire about one another. As Mark Twain famously noted, a sincere compliment can sustain a person's emotional reserves for months. Regular expressions of value prevent the relationship from descending into a negative feedback loop of nagging and character-focused criticism.

### Recognize Differences as Good

In a healthy system, differences are not defects to be corrected but complementary assets to be utilized. Conflict often arises when one partner attempts to force the other to mirror their own cognitive or behavioral patterns. Key systemic friction points include:

- **Decision-Making:** One partner may operate with caution and risk-aversion, while the other favors rapid,

decisive action.

- **Energy Restoration:** The introvert/extrovert dynamic dictates how the system recharges; extroverts seek external stimulation, while introverts require solitude to regulate.
- **Processing Protocols:** External processors think out loud, often changing their stance mid-sentence. Internal processors sort through data privately before presenting a finished thought. This often leads to a systemic failure where the internal processor presents a finality that the other partner cannot influence. As noted in the source, this results in the frustrated retort: "That is not a discussion, that is just your conclusion."

## Look for an "Us" Solution

Couples often default to ineffective conflict styles: Attack (coercion), Surrender (avoidance), or Bargain (transactional "tit-for-tat"). These methods fail because they treat the spouse as the opponent. A functional "Us" solution requires a paradigm shift where the couple views themselves as a single team working against a shared problem.

## Support Your Partner

The most profound systemic recalibration occurs when the fundamental question shifts from "What can you do for me?" to "How can I make your day better?" By proactively seeking to meet the partner's needs, the "atmospheric pressure" of the home shifts from one of demand and resentment to one of mutual support.

## 3. Technical Deep Dive: The Five Steps to an "Us" Solution

To achieve an agreement that serves the partnership, couples should implement this five-step protocol:

1. **Focus on the Issue (Externalizing the Conflict):** Use the "three-seater sofa" analogy. Rather than sitting at opposite ends with the problem between you—blocking your view of one another—imagine moving the problem to a table in front of you. By sitting on the same side of the sofa, you are externalizing the issue, transforming it from something between you into something in front of you to be solved together.
2. **Use "I" Statements:** Avoid "You always" or "You never" statements, which are character-assassination labels that trigger defensive feedback loops. Instead, describe your internal emotional state. Contrast "You always make us late" with "I feel stressed when we leave for the train at the last minute because it impacts my sense of security."
3. **Listen to Each Other:** Establish a strict turn-taking ground rule. This is a critical protocol to ensure the more verbal partner does not dominate the system and that both perspectives are fully integrated before a solution is attempted.
4. **Brainstorm Solutions:** Generate a wide list of options without immediate judgment. In financial conflicts, this might mean a radical systemic shift. Consider the "Pocket Money" example from the source: a husband's rigid control was challenged by his wife's perspective, resulting in a collaborative decision to increase their daughter's allowance by 1,000%. While shocking to the "saver" partner, this represented a transition to a "Team" logic that prioritized the child's learning over the father's caution.
5. **Decide and Review:** Select a solution to implement as a trial. Treat it as an iterative process—if the solution fails to regulate the system, return to the brainstormed list and test a different approach.

## 4. Critical Evaluation: Strengths, Assumptions, and Blind Spots

| Source Insight                                                                                              | Critical Evaluation/Limitation                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The "10 O'Clock Rule": A protocol to pause arguments late at night to prevent cognitive-emotional overload. | High utility, but assumes traditional schedules. It may be difficult to implement for couples with opposite work shifts or differing sleep chronotypes. |

| Source Insight                                                                                      | Critical Evaluation/Limitation                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The "Plank in the Eye" Principle: Focusing on self-change rather than demanding the partner change. | Systemically brilliant, as it breaks the "pursuer-distancer" or "attack-defend" cycle. However, it assumes a "safe" partner; this is not a viable strategy in cases of severe power imbalances or abuse. |
| The Appreciation Habit: Daily intentional words of affirmation to maintain relationship value.      | Essential for "atmospheric" health, but might feel superficial if there are deep-seated, systemic structural issues (like infidelity) that appreciation alone cannot recalibrate.                        |
| Selfishness as the Root: Identifying human selfishness as the primary driver of conflict.           | While accurate in many cases, this may oversimplify conflict by overlooking neurodiversity or trauma-informed triggers that cause involuntary reactive behaviors.                                        |

## 5. Putting it into Practice: Realistic Scenarios & Concrete Exercises

**Scenario Analysis: The "I" Statement in Action** Consider the "dirty wash-up water" example. A husband finds grease congealed in the sink every morning. A character attack would be: "You're lazy and inconsiderate." A systemic "I" statement sounds like: "I feel frustrated when I come down to make your tea and find the sink full of cold, greasy water; it makes my morning start on a stressful note." This invites the partner to solve the "stressful morning" rather than defend their "lazy" character.

### *The Six-Point Appreciation Exercise* 1. *Independent Reflection: Each partner writes down six specific things they admire about the other.* 2. *The Mix: Ensure the list is a balance of Actions (e.g., "I appreciate how you manage the household budget") and Character (e.g., "I admire your patience during crises").* 3. *The Reveal: Read the lists aloud to one another to immediately boost the relationship's positive sentiment override.*

The "How Can I Make Your Day Better?" Challenge Inspired by the husband in the source who spent two weeks asking this daily, this exercise shifts the home's "atmospheric pressure." Even if the partner responds with "tests" or difficult chores (cleaning the garage or the kitchen), consistency is key. The goal is to prove that the system has moved from a "me-centric" to a "we-centric" orientation.

## 6. Warning Signs: When to Seek Professional or Pastoral Support

While these tools are robust, certain "Red Flags" indicate that the internal marital system lacks the resources to heal itself:

- **Uncontrolled Volatility:** When anger leads to "hurling accusations" or verbal aggression that fundamentally damages the relationship's safety.
- **The "Severed Nerve":** Using the surgeon's metaphor, if a "nerve has been cut"—representing a deep emotional wound or a catastrophic breach of trust—professional intervention is required to facilitate healing.
- **Systemic Stagnation:** When conflict has been unresolved for so long that the couple can no longer identify the root causes or feel "incompatible" because they refuse to adjust.

## 7. The "Conflict to Connection" Toolkit

*Essential Mindset Shifts for a Thriving Marriage Partnership over Competition: The problem is the enemy; your spouse is your teammate. Self-Change over Partner-Demands: Recalibrating your own behavior is the most effective way to break a negative cycle. \* Intentionality over Spontaneity: Systemic health (date nights, prayer, and appreciation) must be planned into the schedule, not left to chance.*

## 8. Engagement: Discussion Questions & One-Week Experiment

Discussion Questions:

1. Identify your processing styles: Who is the "internal processor" and who is the "external processor"? How does this lead to the "conclusion vs. discussion" clash?
2. What does our "10 o'clock rule" equivalent look like for our specific work and sleep schedules?
3. Looking at our differences (money, time, energy), how can we frame these as a "complementary team" rather than "opposing forces"?

One-Week Experiment: For seven consecutive days, implement the following systemic protocols:

1. The 10 O'Clock Rule: No contentious discussions after 10:00 PM (or your agreed-upon time).
2. Daily Appreciation: State one specific thing you admire about your partner every day.
3. The Connection Protocol: Spend five minutes praying with and for each other daily. As the source notes, looking to a higher power for unconditional love relieves the "atmospheric pressure" on your spouse to meet all your deepest needs. Ask: "What can I pray for you today?"

## 9. Conclusion: The Power of the Crooked Kiss

The surgeon Richard Seltzer once described a woman whose facial nerve was severed during an operation, leaving her mouth permanently palsied and twisted. When she asked if her face would always be that way, her husband did not look away in disappointment. Instead, he smiled and said he found it "cute." He then bent to kiss her, and Seltzer observed how the husband deliberately twisted his own lips to accommodate hers, ensuring "the kiss still works."

This is the ultimate picture of a successful marriage system. We are all "crooked"—we possess flaws, irritating habits, and different processing speeds. A thriving marriage is not found by seeking a perfect, straight-mouthed partner, but through the deliberate act of accommodation. It is the willingness to "twist one's own lips"—to adjust our own attitudes and behaviors—to meet our partner in love. Through this intentional partnership, the boat stops lurching and finally begins to glide.