

Leadership and Conflict Resolution

Course code: COM 253

Semester and year: Fall 2026

Day and time: Thursdays 15:00-17:35

Classroom: 2.05

Instructor: Dr. Joshua M. Hayden

Instructor contact: Joshua.hayden@aauni.edu

Consultation hours: Tuesdays 13-16:00; Wednesdays 9-11:00 and by appointment

Credits US/ECTS	3/6	Level	Intermediate
Length	15 weeks	Pre-requisite	
Contact hours	42 hours	Course type	Bachelor Required

1. Course Description

This course focuses on leadership as an activity involving leader(s), follower(s) and context; with a focus on one of its chief competencies: conflict resolution. We will explore the roots, challenges, and evidence-based practices of conflict resolution at three levels: (1) direct interpersonal conflict, (2) intervention with others, and (3) group conflict. On these levels, we will examine the leader's role as a conflict negotiator, peacemaker, and change initiator. Within this we will examine the communicative processes and psychology of conflict interaction. We will look at leadership practice through the lens of Adaptive Leadership Theory in a variety of settings including business, NGO, community/ social movements, and students' personal experience. The learning methods of this course will include group discussion, case study analysis, in-class simulations, reflection on readings, and short lectures to provoke further thought and application. The goal is to increase students' capacity for leading conflict by exposing students to different options and strategies for engaging conflict as a leader and follower both professionally and personally.

2. Student Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this course, students should be able to:

1. Distinguish technical from adaptive problems and the leadership implications that emerge from diagnosis of conflict.
2. Understand their own interpersonal conflicts through the lens of the three conversations that comprise a difficult conversation.
3. Apply theoretical frameworks in the conflict research to particular situations and contexts.

4. Apply effective communication strategies in reframing conflict to a learning conversation.
5. Problem-solve through conflict based on analysis of key issues.

3. Reading Material

Required Materials

- Folger, J. P., Poole, M. S., & Stutman, R. K. (2021). *Working through conflict: Strategies for relationships, groups, and organizations, 9th edition*. Routledge. **Available on Perlego:** https://perlego.com/book/2194342/working-through-conflict-strategies-for-relationships-groups-and-organizations-pdf/?utm_medium=share&utm_source=perlego&utm_campaign=share-book
- Stone, Patton & Heen (2010) Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most New York: Penguin. **Select chapters available on NEO.**
- Heifetz, R. & Linsky, M. (2002) *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*. Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press. **Select chapters available on NEO.**

Recommended Materials:

- Bordone, R.C. & Salinas, J. (2025) *Conflict Resilience: Negotiating Disagreement Without Giving Up or Giving In*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Gerzon, M. (2006) *Leading Through Conflict: How Successful Leaders Transform Differences into Opportunities*. Cambridge: Harvard Business Review Press. (On Perlego)
- Furlong, G.T. (2010) *The Conflict Resolution Toolbox: Models and Maps for Analyzing, Diagnosing, and Resolving Conflict*. (On Perlego)
- Coleman, P.T., Deutsch, M., & Marcus, E.C. (2014) *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*. Jossey-Bass. (On Perlego)
- Ripley, A. (2021) *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

4. Teaching methodology

This course will seek to balance high expectations with high support of you and your learning. Effective communication takes consistent practice. To better accomplish our goals, we will:

- Frequently engage in individual exercises and critique in pairs and groups to help each other learn.
- Ask questions and engage in dialogue about the subject matter in class.

- Respond to writing prompts practicing creative generation of ideas, developing structure in essay writing, and evaluating grammar and usage of methods.
- Debate one another with civility in response to readings, class exercises, and current events.
- Give oral presentations in class and receive feedback from the professor as well as peers.

5. Course Schedule

Date	Class Agenda
Lesson 1: Sept. 3	Topic: Introduction to Conflict Resolution and Adaptive Leadership Description: Activity and discussion on the definition and nature of conflict, arenas of conflict and the differences between constructive and destructive conflict. We will discuss class assignments, readings, and course requirements and expectations contained in this syllabus. Reading: This syllabus
Lesson 2: Sept. 10	Topic: Communication and Conflict Description: We will actively discuss the properties of conflict interaction, the nature of change as it relates to leading through conflict and introduce students to one of the major frameworks for the class, Interpersonal Peacekeeping Model. We will explore the overall process of conflict resolution as a series of interactions rather than a one-time episode. Leadership on the Line will guide our thinking about leadership as it relates to conflict, and in this session we will focus on the role of loss. Reading: 1. Folger et al. (2021) Working Through Conflict, chapter 1 "Communication and Conflict" (skip Confrontation Episodes Theory pages) 2. Heifetz & Linsky (2002) Leadership on the Line, chapter 1 The Heart of Danger Assignments/deadlines: • Reading Challenge #1: Hand-written notes
Lesson 3: Sept. 17	Topic: Conflict Perceptions: Risks and Rewards Description: Social cognition about conflict can vary from person to person, but there are some important patterns that psychologists have identified that shape our experience with conflict. We may have different experiences and thresholds of tolerance with conflicts, but in this session we will explore the benefits of engagement and process. We will also discuss the diagnostic aspect of leadership in terms of distinguishing between adaptive and technical challenges. Reading due: 1. Watch Amy Gallo's TED talk "The Gift of Conflict" 2. Read Bordone & Salinas, <i>Conflict Resilience</i> chapter 2 "Rethinking Your Relationship With Conflict" 3. Read Heifetz & Linsky (2002) Leadership on the Line, chapter 3 "Getting to the Balcony" Assignments/deadlines: • Conflict Self-Assessment Paper

Lesson 4: Sept. 24	Topic: Difficult Conversations and Receptiveness Description: Research suggests there is often a gap between our desire to be open to others whom we are in conflict and the other's perception of these gestures of reception. In other words, we think we are being more open than we actually are according to the other person. We will discuss the "three stories" involved in difficult conversations and the importance of asking questions and conveying reception of the other. The psychological concept of "Naïve Realism" we will explore as an inhibitor of receptiveness and we will take a scientific assessment of receptiveness. We will discuss theoretical and practical ways to approach our own assumptions about conflict and how we come across to others. Reading: 1. Stone et. al. (2010) <i>Difficult Conversations</i>, chapter 1 "Sort Out the Three Conversations" 2. Stone et. al. (2010) <i>Difficult Conversations</i>, chapter 2 "Stop Arguing About Who's Right: Explore Each Other's Stories" 3. Chen, Minson & Tormala (2010) Tell me more: The effects of expressed interest on receptiveness during dialog. <i>Journal of Experimental Social Psychology</i>, 46. 4. Listen to <i>Hidden Brain</i> podcast: "Relationships 2.0 How to Keep Conflict from Spiraling" with Dr. Julia Minson Assignments/deadlines: • Reading challenge #2: Quiz on 3 Conversations and receptiveness
Lesson 5: Oct. 1	Topic: Conflict Styles and Strategic Interactions Description: Now that we have made our way through the "differentiation" process of conflict resolution, we need to focus on the "integration" of strategic planning and problem-solving. We will explore conflict styles, the various approaches to conflict, and how we can become more versatile in handling various conflict situations and contexts. Here we will also explore gender, race and cultural influences on conflict styles. The second part of this session will examine the identity conversation in terms of our own and others' sources of identity and how to build awareness and flexibility in our sense of self during conflict. Reading: 1. Folger et al. (2021) <i>Working Through Conflict</i>, chapter 4 "Conflict Styles and Strategic Conflict Interaction" 2. Listen to: Gallo, A. "Four Types of Conflict and How to Manage Them" (19 minutes) on MyLearning Assignments/deadlines: • Reading Challenge #3: Reflecting on your conflict style (take assessment, read, then reflect)
Lesson 6: Oct. 8	Topic: Emotions, Intentions and Work Avoidance Description: Emotional oftentimes play a powerful role in conflict. Sometimes conflicts are almost entirely about the emotions involved. We need strategies to respond helpfully to our own and others emotions and avoid what Heifetz and Linsky call "work avoidance". Stone and colleagues give us here some helpful strategies and ways of thinking about conflict that keep conflicts from escalating, while keeping our integrity in speaking up for ourselves and being generous with others.

	Reading: 1. Stone et. al. (2010) Difficult Conversations, chapter 3 "Don't Assume They Meant It: Disentangle Intent from Impact" 2. Stone et. al. (2010) Difficult Conversations, chapter 4 "Abandon Blame: Map the Contribution System" 3. Stone et. al. (2010) Difficult Conversations, chapter 5 "Have Your Feelings (or they will have you)" Assignments/Deadlines: none
Lesson 7: Oct. 15	Topic: Identity and Face-saving in Conflict Description: Why do we sometimes take conflict so personally? If we look a little deeper into conflict, part of the reason is that there is some felt threat of fundamental human needs (such as the need to belong or the need to be loved) at stake. Irving Goffman introduced the concept of "face" into sociology and it has become a classic concept in social psychology as well. Face is someone's claim to be a certain type of person and thus is centrally concerned with identity issues. We will discuss how to recognize this in ourselves and others and how crucial it is for resolving conflicts in several cases. Readings: 1. Stone et. al. (2010) Difficult Conversations, chapter 6 "Ground Your Identity: Ask Yourself What's at Stake" 2. Stone et. al. (2010) Difficult Conversations, Chapter 8 "Getting Started: Begin from the Third Story" 3. Folger et al. (2021) Working Through Conflict, chapter 6, pgs. 180-186 "Face-Saving" with cases Assignments/deadlines: • Reading Challenge #4: Analyses of short cases
Lesson 8: Oct. 22	Topic: Dealing with Difficult People Description: We will examine the social science on how to deal with arrogant jerks, blunt people that make rude comments, those that annoy us, and bad bosses. How do you handle people that just don't give a damn? How do you speak up for yourself and others when someone is being rude, offensive or worse? We will practice the skills of Difficult Conversations in terms of encountering passive-aggression, taboo behaviors, and unethical speech and action. Reading: 1. Stone et. al. (2010) Difficult Conversations, ch. 9 "Learning: Listen from the Inside Out" 2. Stone et. al. (2010) Difficult Conversations, ch. 10 "Expression: Speak for Yourself with Clarity and Power" Assignments/deadlines: • Interpersonal Conflict Project
Oct. 29	Mid-term break: enjoy!
Lesson 9: Nov. 5	Topic: Power and Politics in Conflict & Leadership Description: Understanding power and politics are both integral to understanding leadership. Essential to good leadership is the ability to anticipate resistance, form strategic alliances, utilize different forms of power, and navigate politics. We will practically discuss the uses and balance of power in conflict including the ethical implications. Reading:

	1. Folger et al. (2021) Working Through Conflict, chapter 5 "Power: The Architecture of Conflict" 2. Heifetz & Linsky (2002) Leadership on the Line, chapter 4 "Think Politically" Assignments/deadlines: • Reading Challenge #5: Questions and Reaction to readings
Lesson 10: Nov. 12	Topic: Cultural Differences & Orchestrating Conflict Description: The environment and external influences (often internalized) on conflict interaction are critical to pay attention to. In this session we will mostly explore the impact of culture and cultural differences on conflict. We will discuss misunderstanding that come with cross-cultural conflict and how we can move past these to interact more effectively. We will also discuss when to initiate conflict as a leader or follower in order to address purposes or needed changes. We will apply the metaphorical concept of regulating the temperature when it comes to conflict. Reading: 1. Heifetz & Linsky (2002) Leadership on the Line, ch. 5 "Orchestrate the Conflict" 2. Other reading, TBA Assignments/deadlines: • Reading challenge #6: Cultural Comparison Implications • Conflict Leadership Case Analysis topic due
Lesson 11: Nov. 19	Topic: Principles of Negotiation (with special guest) Description: Often conflict and negotiation are taught together, especially in business contexts, as they share many of the same properties and interpersonal principles. However, negotiation has some distinct properties as it distinguishes claiming value from creating value for both parties and other psychological biases such as anchoring. We will practice negotiating and using the principles from the articles and from best practices to understand artful negotiation in a deeper way. This class will include a special guest AAU lecturer and former CEO Heinrich Homola. Reading: 1. Six Habits of Merely Effective Negotiators (Harvard Business Review) Sebenius, J.K. Assignments/deadlines: none
Lesson 12: Nov. 26	Topic: Intergroup Conflict, Mediation, & Giving the Work Back Description: Part of the ethics of leadership is understanding not only how deep conflict emerges between groups (like the deep polarization we see today around the world), but to cross those divides as a catalyst for reconciliation and peace. Here we'll discuss how to "scale up" some of the principles we've learned interpersonally to group conflict, how to mediate effectively between groups and Heifetz and Linsky's concept of "giving the work back to the people with the problem." Readings: 1. Heifetz & Linsky (2002) Leadership on the Line, ch. 6 "Give the Work Back" 2. Folger et al. (2021) Working Through Conflict, chapter 8 "Managing Conflict" 3. Stone et. al. (2010) Difficult Conversations, chapter 11 "Problem-Solving: Take the Lead"

	Assignments/ deadlines: • Check-ins about Conflict Leadership Case Analysis • Reading Challenge #7: Quiz on Readings
Lesson 13: Dec. 3	Topic: Leading Adaptive Change: The Case of Mayor Jan Kasl Description: In this lesson we will take a deep dive into a leadership case of a Prague City Mayor's efforts to fight corruption and increase transparency about 20 years ago. Students will read and come with questions about this case and we will be joined by a special guest, Jan Kasl himself to discuss the lessons in leadership he took from this period. Students will have the chance to speak with a local leader and learn about his struggle up close. Then we will discuss the student cases they have been investigating for the past couple weeks along with the idea of "holding steady" in leading. Reading: 4. Read "Reforming Prague City Hall: The Efforts of Mayor Jan Kasl to Increase Transparency and Fight Corruption." Harvard Kennedy School of Government. 5. Read Heifetz & Linsky (2002) Leadership on the Line, ch. 7 "Hold Steady" Assignments/deadlines: • Reading Challenge #8: Critical Questions for Jan Kasl • Conflict Leadership Case Analysis due (short presentations)
Lesson 14: Dec. 10	Topic: Final Exam Description: Written, in class final exam including a case study response and short answer questions. Study Guide will be provided in the weeks prior to this exam. Assignments/deadlines: • Study for final exam (written in class)

6. Course Requirements and Assessment (with estimated workloads)

Assignment	Workload (avg.)	Weight in Final Grade	Evaluated Course Specific Learning Outcomes	Evaluated Institutional Learning Outcomes*
Attendance and Class Participation	42	19%	1, 2 & 4	2,3
Reading Challenges (8)	35	16%	3	1
Conflict Self-Assessment Paper	10	10%	1,2	2,3
Interpersonal Conflict Project	30	20%	3,2	1,3
Conflict Leadership Case Analysis	18	20%	1,2,	1,2
Final Exam	15	15%	4,5	3
TOTAL	150	100%		

*1 = Critical Thinking; 2 = Effective Communication; 3 = Effective and Responsible Action

7. Detailed description of the assignments

Attendance and class participation

Missing more than 3 class sessions will result in failure in the course. Attendance and participation is a grade that includes active engagement during class, showing you've done the reading, short assignments, putting cell phones away (not on the table), and being on-time for class. *Being distracted by phones or laptop use will affect this grade.*

The following are some general expectations for class participation that are inspired by the approach of Aristotle in finding the ideal mean of the virtue. An ideal—perhaps even virtuous—student will substantively improve the learning of the group by doing some or all of the following:

1. **Curiosity:** Ask questions that uncover confusion or contradiction, probe the depths of an idea, or appropriately apply concepts from the texts to the real world.
2. **Collaboration:** In small groups, help the group learn by keeping on task, exploring new ideas, listening, and appropriately adding their own questions and insights.
3. **Contribution:** Come to class not only having done the reading, but having given it thought. The virtuous student is willing to express both confusion and questions as well as offer theories of explanation.

Assessment Breakdown:

Assessed area	Percentage
Puts cell phone away and if they use a laptop, not distracted by their use. Closes laptop to engage with others during discussion and activity	25%
Evidence of critical reflection on readings and lecture content	25%
Works effectively with others and engages in class discussion verbally and nonverbally	25%
Asks good questions or provides comment and thus shows curiosity about class content or readings	25%

Assignment 1: Reading Challenges

Comprehending the readings assigned and coming with prior knowledge is a large part of the learning in this class. To that end, these short assignments are designed for you to both (1) show you have engaged with the reading on a deeper level, and (2) that you are ready to contribute something to the class. Your reading challenges will come in a variety of forms and specific instructions will be given on MyLearning.

Submit this before class via NEO (pay attention to format instructions) or, as in the case of quizzes, you can bring hand-written notes to complete them in class.

Assessment breakdown

Assessed area	Percentage
Questions or personal application demonstrates accurate understanding of subject matter.	25%
Evidence of critical reflection on readings (comparisons, connections, applications, further inquiry)	25%
Follows guidelines and submission criteria	25%
Examples / illustrations or questions are specific enough to generate discussion in class and contributes to others' learning	25%

Assignment 2: Conflict Self-Assessment Paper

As we begin the semester, students are best served if they begin to assess their own abilities to recognize and resolve conflict. One reason this is important is that identifying gaps or areas of weakness when it comes to conflict serve as motivations for students throughout the semester. The second is that evidence suggests that growing in our ability to resolve conflict starts with us—our perceptions, behaviors and attitudes toward conflict. This short paper will be in response to the readings and a couple critical questions. The paper should be specific and reflective, not a summary of the readings. The length of the paper should be 1 to 1.5 pages double-spaced. No formal citations are necessary, just naming the title or author of the reading when you use it.

Reflection questions for the paper structure:

1. When you think of having conflict in general, what are your default attitudes or beliefs about it? Do you tend to avoid, fight, freeze, yield, or numb when it comes to conflict?
2. What mistakes and recommendations that Gallo suggests in her TED talk resonate with your experience?
3. When you consider “befriending conflict” as Bordone & Salinas suggest, what personal losses or adaptive challenges come to mind? In what ways is resolving conflict similar to “going beyond your authority” (Heifetz & Linsky)?
4. [In conclusion] What changes would you like to make in your relationship with conflict and/or leadership as it relates to handling conflict?

This paper sets the tone for motivated learning in this course and will be meaningful to look back on at the end.

Assessment breakdown

Assessed area	Percentage
References readings and shows evidence of initial engagement with them.	25%
Demonstrates critical thinking through personal application	25%
Organized and specific in terms of aspirations and goals for the course	25%
Shows a willingness to look at their own weaknesses and limitations that could impact good leadership or conflict resolution	25%

Assignment 3: Interpersonal Conflict Project

In this written case study students will apply a framework from Difficult Conversations to zoom in on a specific case of conflict in which they were engaged. They will write out, as best they can recall, a transcript of a specific conflict conversation and then analyze it using the framework. This will result in a section where students will write some lessons learned, or next steps they could take in resolving the conflict.

Assessment breakdown

Assessed area	Percentage
Follows the guidelines of the case study method outlined in the assignment.	25%
Demonstrates critical thinking and good analysis	25%
Evidence of honest and transparent assessment of what they thought but did not say during a conflict.	25%

Shows a willingness to look at their own weaknesses and limitations that could impact good leadership	25%
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Assignment 4: Conflict Leadership Case Analysis

This assignment challenges students to apply their course learning to a conflict case outside the classroom. They will choose a case of conflict in a work or community environment that they can investigate and analyze from a leadership perspective. This means that it needs to be a case they either they can research or gather information and/or interview people that were involved. The case should not be something the student was directly involved in, but something they can explore from multiple vantage points or "sides." It could be on a controversial topic in the community, a public policy debate, an employee conflict, an internal rift in an organization, or something else. Keep in mind that sensitive topics may be harder to find people to discuss it and need to be handled ethically (e.g. with consent and sensitivity).

Ideally, students should conduct at least 1 interview about the conflict. If there is no other information about the conflict available, more than 1 interview may be appropriate. May sure that participants know that this is for learning purposes and will not be released for broader consumption or published. The objective is "real world" application and learning in social/organizational/public contexts.

Students should select conflict and leadership principles from multiple readings to evaluate how conflict was handled in their case. This will mean articulating a "conceptual framework" including key concepts from which to analyze the case and draw out some "lessons learned." Students are encouraged to draw from good, bad and mixed examples within the class. Certain implications for future progress on the conflict may emerge. This paper will be 5-6 pages double spaced

Assessment breakdown

Assessed area	Percentage
Applies an existing or constructed from course content rubric for evaluating disagreement, conflict, and/or leadership (uses their learning from the course)	25%
Provides evidence of understanding and engagement in the event through interviews, articles, and/or documents	25%
Displays critical thought about the topics discussed at the event and makes connections with and between course material.	25%
Written account and analysis is well-organized and follows instructions	25%

Assignment 5: Final Exam

This exam exists in two parts and will be discussed and prepared for two weeks before the actual written exam in class.

1. Students can bring their hand-written notes (only) to the exam in order to answer the case study in written essay form.
2. Part 2 will be short answer questions regarding the major concepts from the course based on classroom lectures and readings.

The final exam will test students on their applied knowledge of the concepts discussed in class and in the readings. Study guides will be provided in advance. The exams will consist of short-answer and case scenario response questions.

Assessment breakdown

Assessed area	Percentage
Demonstrates understanding of key concepts in Working Through Conflict, Difficult Conversations and Leadership on the Line.	25%
Applies key concepts to specific cases, diagnosing the key issues and leadership implications offering constructive ways forward based on the reading and lectures.	25%
Provides specific examples and connection to the main ideas in the course.	25%
Evidences personal engagement with course material and critical thinking.	25%

General Requirements and School Policies

General requirements

All coursework is governed by AAU's academic rules. Students are expected to be familiar with the academic rules in the Academic Codex and Student Handbook and to maintain the highest standards of honesty and academic integrity in their work. Please see the AAU intranet for a [summary of key policies](#) regarding coursework.

Course specific requirements

- **Very limited use of laptops in class: take handwritten notes if you want better outcomes!**

Laptops will only be used in class rarely, I strongly recommend that you take handwritten notes. There is strong evidence that suggests that using laptops to take notes (vs. taking handwritten notes) results in **shallower processing and worse performance** on conceptual questions (Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014). Note taking **improves cognitive processing** and forces students to summarize and process as they go along instead of copying verbatim as students tend to do with laptops. Laptops create a **distracting environment** from course material and active engagement. Evidence suggests this has detrimental effects on student learning (Dontre, 2021).

Class presentations, PowerPoints, will be available on NEO for your review after class. Readings are meant to complement classroom lectures, activities and discussions so your notes will be critical along with the readings for full comprehension and your success in this class.

References on note taking:

- Dontre, A. J. (2021). The influence of technology on academic distraction: A review. *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies*, 3(3), 379-390.

- Mueller, P. A., & Oppenheimer, D. M. (2014). The pen is mightier than the keyboard: Advantages of longhand over laptop note taking. *Psychological science*, 25(6), 1159-1168.

Prepared by: Joshua M Hayden
Date: 10 August 2026

Approved by:
Date: