



## **Strategic Discernment: the key to conflict resolution**

By

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While developing the training manual for my recently published book, *Resolving Disputes with Your Boss: Six Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict at Work*, I stumbled across a reference to Ronald A. Heifetz's Adaptive Leadership model. The moment jarred me. I had just completed a fourteen-month research and writing journey that identified thirty distinct leadership strategies, and not once had Heifetz's work appeared on my radar. A gross oversight—and a personal mea culpa.

What made the moment even more striking was the realization that Heifetz and his colleagues had been traveling a parallel intellectual path to mine. Adaptive Leadership captures the same three elements that underpin the six conflict-resolution strategies outlined in my book. Our focus points differ—Heifetz aims at Leadership within systems, while my goal is to empower employees navigating conflict within environments defined by unequal institutional power and authority. Yet the underlying dynamics we are both trying to explain and remediate are remarkably similar.

Curious (and slightly humbled), I purchased a copy of Heifetz's *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (1994) and his 2009 co-authored follow-up, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*. What captured my attention almost immediately was his distinction between technical problems and adaptive challenges. This distinction now feels essential to any honest conversation about conflict resolution.

## Adaptive Leadership

Technical problems are those that can be solved with existing knowledge, expertise, or procedures. They have known solutions and clear lines of responsibility. If the report was never completed, if the wrong form was submitted, if a deadline was missed because expectations were unclear—these are problems that can be fixed with better processes, more explicit instructions, or improved coordination. They may be frustrating, but they are not conceptually complicated.

Adaptive challenges, however, operate on an entirely different plane. They require new learning, shifts in perspective, and changes in behavior among the individuals involved. Adaptive challenges are complex because they are emotional. They involve uncertainty, threat, loss, and the uncomfortable reality that no amount of technical expertise can resolve them. You cannot “train” your way out of them with a checklist. These challenges live not only in the tasks individuals perform in the workplace; they also occupy—and often overpower—the emotional tensions we all face.

While neither category is free of conflict, adaptive challenges are—by their very nature—the most conflict-laden. They sit at the intersection of identity, competence, trust, and change. They press on vulnerabilities and force people to confront what they do not yet know, cannot yet do, or are not yet ready to admit. When Heifetz lays out his fourth strategic principle of leadership, “give the work back to the people” (Heifetz, p. 128), he describes an inherently destabilizing process. It requires collaboration, new learning, emotional steadiness, and a willingness to stay in difficult conversations long enough for something meaningful to shift.

This is where my own work and Heifetz’s begin to overlap in ways I had not anticipated. His leadership quandaries map directly onto the challenges employees face when trying to resolve workplace conflict without positional power. Both frameworks require individuals to pause, interpret what they are seeing, and respond with intention. And this realization has led me to coin a phrase that captures the heart of what we are both attempting to articulate: Strategic Discernment.

## What Strategic Discernment Requires from All of Us

Strategic Discernment is the ability to distinguish—moment by moment—what kind of problem you are facing and what kind of response it requires. It is not simply a diagnosis; it is the disciplined practice of determining how to respond, when to act, what to say, and when to wait. It is the foundation upon which every conflict-resolution strategy in my book rests.

Most workplace conflicts escalate not because people lack solutions, but because they misdiagnose the problem. They treat adaptive challenges as technical ones. They reach for quick fixes when the real issue requires patience, trust-building, and emotional understanding. They

assume that if they can “explain the facts,” the other person will shift their position and surrender. But adaptive problems do not yield to facts alone—because facts are not the issue. The issue is what the facts mean to the individuals involved.

Strategic Discernment begins with acknowledging that both technical and adaptive elements often coexist. A conversation may start with a technical question, “Why wasn’t the deliverable submitted?”—but beneath that question may lie an adaptive issue: eroding trust, pressure from above, fear of losing credibility, or resentment about workload distribution. If you respond only to the technical dimension, you miss the emotional reality driving the conflict.

### Core Steps

The five core steps of Strategic Discernment are easy to write but hard to do consistently. They require honest introspection, practice, and patience:

- Recognize the surface issue.  
What is being stated as the problem?
- Identify the emotional undercurrents.  
What is being felt but not said?
- Separate technical elements from adaptive ones.  
What can be fixed with clarity versus what requires learning, trust-building, or behavioral change?
- Choose a strategy aligned with the true nature of the challenge.  
This is where the six conflict-resolution strategies from my book come into play—Phased Intercession, Controlled Communication, Superordinate Goals, Unilateral Initiatives/GRIT, SPIN-style questioning, and Principled Negotiation.
- Adjust in real time as the pattern of trust changes.  
Trust is not static—it shifts moment to moment. Discernment is therefore continuous, not one-and-done.

Consider a simple example: A supervisor criticizes an employee for missing a deadline. On the surface, it appears to be a technical issue: the deadline was missed. But suppose the employee missed it because the supervisor’s expectations changed twice, the workload was inconsistent, or unclear instructions caused confusion. Now the issue is partly technical—but the emotional response (frustration, defensiveness, or disappointment) is adaptive. If either side treats the situation purely as a technical matter, the conflict escalates. If both recognize the adaptive layer, the conversation changes: from blame to clarity, from defensiveness to understanding, from urgency to strategy.

This is Strategic Discernment in action.

## So Why Does It Matter?

Now more than ever, the modern workplace is filled with ambiguity. Remote and hybrid work, shifting priorities, unclear authority structures, and relentless change all create conditions in which adaptive challenges are the norm. Very few conflicts are purely technical anymore. People are stressed, overloaded, and often unsure whether they still have the same footing they once had.

Under such conditions, conflicts rise quickly—and trust erodes even faster.

Organizations increasingly recognize that the ability to solve problems depends not simply on technical skill but on interpersonal awareness. They reward individuals who can read complex emotional landscapes, interpret ambiguous behavior accurately, and respond in ways that stabilize rather than inflame. Yet employees—especially those without authority—are rarely trained to do this. They are handed tasks, not guidance. Strategic Discernment fills that gap. It provides the connective tissue between leadership theory and real-world conflict resolution.

In that sense, discovering Heifetz’s work after publishing my book was both humbling and affirming. It affirmed what I had observed repeatedly in my own research: conflict resolution is not a matter of technique but of interpretation. It requires you to ask not only, “What should I do?” but also, “What is happening here?” and “What is the other person trying to protect?” and “What emotional conditions must shift before any solution becomes possible?”

Strategic Discernment is the discipline of asking those questions.

It is the mental model that allows you to select the right strategy for the right moment and to apply it with precision rather than desperation. It bridges the gap between the orderly world of technical solutions and the unpredictable world of human emotions. And it acknowledges a truth that both Heifetz and my own work insist upon. There are no easy answers, only better ways of understanding what you’re facing.

In the end, the convergence of these two frameworks—Adaptive Leadership and the six conflict-resolution strategies—points toward a more disciplined, humane, and strategic approach to navigating conflict. Strategic Discernment is not a technique. It is a mindset, a skill, and a daily practice. And it may well be the key to resolving workplace conflicts where power is unequal, demands are high, and the emotional stakes are real.

\* Note: A pdf copy of this article can be found at:

[https://www.mcl-associates.com/downloads/strategic\\_discernment.pdf](https://www.mcl-associates.com/downloads/strategic_discernment.pdf)