

SUMMARY

NEGOTIATING THE NONNEGOTIABLE

DANIEL SHAPIRO



Summary of “Negotiating the Nonnegotiable” by Daniel Shapiro

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Learn How to Resolve Your Most Emotionally
Charged Conflicts

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Introduction

What drives people to conflict? Like many people, you may have experienced conflict that has torn apart a friendship, broken up a marriage, destroyed a business, or fueled physical violence. According to conflict resolution expert Daniel Shapiro, the forces that drive people into conflict are invisible to the eye, yet their impact is deeply felt. And until we learn how to counteract such forces, we will continue to engage in the same frustrating conflicts that can ruin relationships. Emotionally charged conflicts are a part of life, they are part of what it means to be human. Everyday people resent their romantic partners and hold grudges against a colleague. For example, a couple wrestles over the values that should govern their shared life together. They must negotiate their divergent perspectives on finances, household roles, and even politics. Emotionally charged conflicts can even affect entire nations; for instance, nations undergo debates all the time over which policies to implement. At the root of each debate and conflict is identity. It's always *me* versus *you* or *us* versus *them*. We point fingers, place blame, and insist, "This is *your* fault." When it comes to emotionally charged conflicts, collaborative problem solving doesn't often work. That's because you cannot *solve* emotions. You can't simply rid yourself of anger or humiliation as easily as solving a math problem. Mathematical equations won't tell you how the other side is going to react. Additionally, you can't simply adopt the other side's beliefs either.

So what's the solution? How can you resolve emotionally charged conflicts? Throughout *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable*, Daniel Shapiro aims to provide you with the necessary tools and to teach you a practical method to help bridge even the toughest emotional divides. He will teach you how to change your perspective from *me* versus *you* or *us* versus *them* and focus on the space between sides, space where complicated emotional dynamics exist. If you want to learn how to transform an emotionally charged conflict into an opportunity for mutual benefit, then you must learn how to effectively navigate this space. There is a better way to resolve conflict, so keep reading to learn more.

Our Identity Makes it Difficult to Make Resolutions

Our world is becoming more and more of a *tribal world*. As the world sees advances in technology, we are more connected than ever, allowing us to connect with even more people. This thread of connection - the emerging global community - is also threatening a fundamental aspect of who we are. Naturally, we tend to find security and safety in our *tribes*. We belong to multiple tribes, a tribe is any group to which we see ourselves as a similar kind, whether based on religion, ethnicity, or even our place of work. We feel a connection to our tribes and we become emotionally invested.

Our tribes are a part of our identity, and when it comes to conflict resolution, we tend to subscribe to three models of human behavior. The first side of our personality appeals to rationality and rational decision known as *homo economicus*. That is, your main motivation is to get your interests met as efficiently as possible. If you can satisfy the interests of the other party too, then all the better. In other words, we try to maximize our own gains without worsening those of our counterpart, this is especially true when it comes to time and money.

The second side of our personality appeals to our emotions. This is known as *homo emoticus*, and according to this model, emotions can facilitate conflict resolution. Just as hunger alerts you to the necessity of food, your emotions can alert you to your psychological needs. For instance, guilt aims to tell you when you need to rectify a wrongdoing and frustration lets you know when an obstacle is in your way. Unfortunately, emotions can also hinder conflict resolution. Emotions like anger, pride, and resentment can result in a deadlock. Lastly, beyond reason and emotion is your identity. This third dimension of human behavior is called *homo identicus*, which is rooted in the principle that human beings seek meaning in their existence. This is why emotionally charged conflicts get so “charged.” The conflict might compromise a fundamental aspect of who you are, what you hold as

important, and how you conceive meaning in your life. In other words, it threatens *you*.

Author Daniel Shapiro put together an experiment to prove just how stubborn humans are when it comes to changing our identity. Shapiro began the experiment by dividing 45 participants into six groups; each group was then asked a series of diverse questions that asked participants to provide things like their views on capital punishment, or what they consider the most important values of each tribe. After 50 minutes of discussion, the group then had to choose just one tribe out of the six to represent all of them. If they failed, the earth would be destroyed by aliens. Over two decades, Shapiro has completed this exercise dozens of times with all kinds of people all over the world. The world has exploded *all but a handful of times*. Participants become so connected to their new identities that they refuse to take on a new one to save the world. This simply shows how strong tribal bonds can be and how quickly they can form.

Understanding Our Core Identity and Relational Identity

To begin resolving an emotionally charged conflict, there are two facets of identity that are critical for understanding: core identity and relational identity. Your core identity is the biography of your being, it is the spectrum of characteristics that define you as an individual. It includes everything from your body, personality, and occupation to your spiritual beliefs and cultural practices. Without core identities, the world would cease to exist as we know it. “Nations would have no constitutions or flags; businesses would have no brands; people would have no names or personalities.”

The most meaningful aspects of your core identity are what Shapiro calls the Five Pillars of Identity: beliefs, rituals, allegiances, values, and emotionally meaningful experiences, like the day you got married or gave birth to a child. Core identity, however, is not fixed. It has a fluidity. For example, you can adopt new and different values, but the essence of who you are would remain unchanged. You as an individual would stay the same. A group’s core identity can also change. A company can redefine its guiding values but remain the “same” company. Similarly, a political party can modify its essential beliefs and remain the same political party.

On the other hand, your relational identity is the spectrum of characteristics that define your relationship with a particular person or group. For instance, when you interact with your spouse, do you feel constrained or free to be *as you really are*? You see, your relational identity seeks meaning in *coexistence* and you have the power to shape it depending on the nature of the relationship. In the Tribes Exercise from the previous chapter, the tribes began their negotiation as colleagues eager to save the world from destruction. As negotiations continued, tensions arose and each tribe’s affiliation to other tribes quickly collapsed. But why?

While the author originally believed this happened after a tribe experienced rejection, he found that the true reason was that relational identities

fluctuated more easily than core identities. Tensions arose because the groups realized how they were perceived by other groups. Relationships between groups were tested and oftentimes became strained, but their core identities remained the same. Both autonomy and affiliation are intrinsic to any relationship, and your ability to keep them in balance is crucial for harmonious relationships. For example, children try to fit into their families *and* find their own independent voices as they mature. Or a romantic couple tries to balance the desire to cultivate their relationship while also maintaining healthy “alone time.”

Because relational identity causes us to incorrectly assume what someone is thinking about us, it's important to maintain an atmosphere of cooperation to achieve success in negotiations or conflicts.

A Threat to Our Identity Triggers The Tribes Effect

When engaging in a negotiation or conflict, our mindset matters. Conflicts can often be negotiable, but when we feel our identity is threatened, a seemingly small conflict can turn into an insurmountable one. Shapiro calls this the Tribes Effect, and we must learn to avoid it.

When we engage in the Tribes Effect, we adopt a *me versus you* and *us versus them* mindset. This mindset likely evolved to help groups protect their bloodlines from outside threats. Today it can be easily activated in a conflict between all types of people, including siblings or even diplomats. The Tribes Effect aims to protect your identity from harm but often backfires. As you enter a self-protective state, your willingness to collaborate diminishes. Fear then drives you to prioritize short-term self-interest over long-term cooperation. As a result, when one or both parties adopt this mindset, no resolution is found. You simply reinforce the conflict you aim to resolve.

So how can you know when you are in it? The Tribes Effect is fundamentally an adversarial, self-righteous mindset. You can feel when this is happening! You'll think that you are in the right and you'll become unable to see what you have in common with your opponent. You'll experience relational amnesia, in which you forget all the good things about your relationship and only recall the bad. Furthermore, the Tribes Effect breeds the self-serving mindset, in which we believe our perspective is not only right but also morally superior. Lastly, you'll experience a closed mindset, in which you critique your adversary's perspective and condemn their character. But criticizing your own perspective will only make you seem disloyal to your own identity.

Whenever our identity becomes threatened, the Tribes Effect is triggered. As a result, we tend to react with a rigid set of behaviors that neuroscientists call *a threat response*. This response can turn even

seemingly minor differences between people into major conflicts. Shapiro once illustrated this response by conducting an exercise in which people were told to argue over whether “humanitarianism” or “compassion” represented a more important core value. While outsiders might perceive this distinction as relatively small, insiders viewed it as an existential threat. This same dynamic is what leads married couples to consistently argue over “trivial” differences. In other words, what we perceive to be “trivial” on the outside can be more than a matter of trivial concern.

Resisting the Lure of the Tribes Effect

So how can we overcome the Tribes Effect? The answer is to adopt a strategy much like that of the Greek hero Odysseus. You see, as Odysseus was navigating his ten-year journey home after the Trojan War, he met the goddess Circe, who warned him of a danger he would face on his journey: beautiful Sirens would attempt to lure Odysseus and his sailors to their deaths with their beautiful voices. Before the journey, Odysseus ordered his crew to put wax in their ears and tie him to the mast. No matter how much he begged and pleaded to become untied, they must only bind him tighter. As a result, Odysseus and his crew sailed safely past the Sirens.

Like the Sirens, the Tribes Effect draws you toward it. The more emotionally invested you are, the more difficult it becomes to resist its pull. In an emotionally charged conflict, there are Five Lures of the Tribal Mind. The first is *vertigo*. Vertigo is a trap. Picture it as a tornado surrounding you and your adversary. Its swirling walls prevent you from seeing anything beyond the conflict itself. Strong gusts of wind blow at you and your opponent, only to heighten the intensity of your emotional experience. It turns anger into rage and sadness into despair. At the center of the tornado, you see the sky above, the image of your greatest fears; meanwhile, the uprooted ground beneath you reveals your painful past.

Let's take a look at a husband and wife who are shopping at the mall. She sees a bedspread she likes, but the husband doesn't want it. This seemingly trivial dispute suddenly spirals into an argument where the two begin questioning why they ever got married. Twenty minutes have passed, the two are so sucked into the tornado of vertigo that they have failed to recognize the world going on around them. So how can you avoid the trap?

The first step is to be aware of the symptoms. There are three questions you should ask yourself: are you consumed by the conflict? Do you view the other as an adversary? Are you fixated on the negative? Perhaps you notice that you are thinking about the conflict more than anything else in your life.

Recognize that you must view the conflict as a difference of opinion rather than an emotional battle. Notice if the conflict triggers you to think about past pain or future fears. Next, you need to simply stop. Once you become aware that you are slipping into vertigo, take a breath. Then another. Slow down. Then wait until you regain perspective before continuing the discussion.

The last step is to name it. Simply identifying what you are experiencing as vertigo can greatly reduce its power over you. For example, when Shapiro and his wife were recently getting into an argument, his wife paused and stated, “I feel like we’re slipping into vertigo. Do we really want to spend the afternoon arguing?” By recognizing the onset of vertigo, the two were able to resist its lure. They then agreed to continue the discussion, but if a resolution could not be reached then they would take a break. As a result, they didn’t become muddled in the space between them.

Taboos Are a Source of Conflict but Can Be Overcome Using the Necessary Steps

Perhaps there is something that you absolutely cannot express to a family member. Maybe it's a deep resentment, a long-standing grudge, or even a pang of envy. Now imagine getting into a conflict with that person where it becomes impossible to vocalize the heart of your discord. How do you resolve a conflict that you cannot discuss? This is another lure of the Tribal Mind: *taboos*. While taboos exist to protect individuals from what might be seen as offensive, they can lure you toward the Tribes Effect if you are not careful.

A taboo identifies certain feelings, thoughts, or actions as being off-limits, thus creating a boundary of what is acceptable and what is forbidden within a community. For example, premarital sex is acceptable in some cultures but taboo in others. A taboo is simply a social construction, meaning they are relative rather than absolute and aren't universally offensive. For this reason, taboos are a common cause of conflict. So how can you navigate taboos?

The first step is to become aware of taboos, to establish a safe zone to discuss them, and to decide systematically how to treat them. One of the stumbling blocks of taboos is that many people are unaware of the taboo. For example, when visiting a couple at their newly purchased home, the author was joined by a friend who also happened to be in the real estate business. The friend asked, "So how much did you pay for this house?" The couple looked at each other awkwardly and said, "We don't discuss those kinds of things." The friend hit on a taboo subject - financial privacy. Therefore, it's important to recognize taboos in your own life.

To do so, imagine that you must write a secret guide about what you cannot say or do in your own relationships. Ask yourself, "What are the rules?" and "What subjects are off-limits?" Once you are aware of the taboo, it's time to establish a safe zone. To do this, you'll need to bring up the taboo in

conversation. Explicitly state what you wish to talk about by saying something like, “Might we talk about the incident from last May?” Or “I find it hard to talk about our company’s dysfunction without being able to consider some of the leaders involved. Might it be okay for us to privately discuss that?” The key is coming to a mutual agreement to discuss a taboo issue with shared consent.

Finally, it’s time to make an action plan. You can use the “ACT” system to evaluate whether to accept the taboo, chisel it away slowly, or tear it down in short order. Accepting a taboo can take time and doesn’t mean that you must accept it forever. For instance, a husband may recognize it is taboo to discuss his wife’s infidelity now, but the agreement may change over time. Chiseling away at a taboo requires steady, open communication. Take the spread of HIV and AIDS in Africa, for example. Those infected with the virus felt the stigma of the disease and felt it safest to hide their diagnosis to preserve their relationships with family, friends, partners, and communities. This taboo caused the virus to spread even more rapidly. Ultimately, the taboo had to be broken to prevent the virus from taking over. Had people spoken up sooner, the infection rate might not have been so high.

Tearing down the taboo entirely requires courage. It essentially involves taking a wrecking ball to destroy a social taboo and will likely incur the wrath of those who prefer to maintain the status quo. Nelson Mandela spent his entire life tearing down taboos. In 1948, South Africa’s National Party enforced a system of racial segregation known as apartheid. Mandela protested the policy. He was arrested, convicted of sabotage, and sentenced to life in prison. After twenty-seven years in prison, he returned to lead South Africa through a nonviolent transition to a multiracial government. Ultimately, when we confront taboos, we build better relationships and bring out positive change.

Your Mythos of Identity

As humans, we are innate storytellers. From the moment you are born, you are bombarded with stories surrounding your identity - your name, your culture, your historical web of allies and adversaries. These stories go on to shape your identity. Of the stories that fuel the conflict in your life, your mythos of identity perhaps affects you the most. Your mythos of identity is the core narrative that shapes how you see your identity in relation to the other side; oftentimes, you likely see yourself as the victim and the other as the villain.

While facilitating a negotiation exercise for global leadership, Shapiro randomly arranged the fifty attendees into economic classes, ranging from elites to lower-income groups. The elites were given more money and resources while the lower-income groups were given hardly anything. They then had three rounds to trade resources and maximize their independent financial success. As the elites compounded their wealth, the lower classes' frustration grew. After three rounds, the elites had accumulated so much wealth, they were allowed to set new rules.

While the elites discussed how to reconfigure the bargaining rules to benefit the lower classes, *not themselves*, the lower classes lamented their distrust, urging one another to steal their stuff or start a revolution! Upon hearing the new rules that would benefit the lower classes, they began to accuse the elites of abusing their power. Eventually, everyone began shouting and a resolution was never made. Both groups became attached to their respective mythos of identity which only intensified the conflict.

So if you want to resolve conflicts where the mythos of identity is involved, you'll need to use a three-step method that Shapiro calls *creative introspection*. First, establish a brave space for genuine dialogue. While many believe a safe space is best for discussing controversial topics, a safe space can be *too safe* and backfire. On the other hand, a brave space emboldens you to embrace controversy, take personal risks, and reconsider

perspectives. Second, identify each other's mythos. By identifying each mythos, you'll be able to understand why the other person is behaving as he is. For instance, perhaps you argue incessantly with an arrogant colleague until you learn that he was bullied as a child and simply longs for social respect.

Finally, revise your own mythos. Perhaps in the above conflict with your arrogant colleague, you could begin to support his work and give him more responsibilities. As a result, you'll allow him to revise his mythos. No longer will he feel like a victim but a leader.

Emotional Pain Can Be Resolved Through a Three-Step Process

Have you ever held a grudge against someone? You might wonder why you can't simply let it go. Well, if you aren't emotionally ready to let go of something, then you never will. Sustaining a grudge requires intense personal energy that can begin to eat away at your own well-being and integrity. So once you're emotionally ready to give it up, then it's time to check your BAG. Ask yourself, "What would it feel like to unburden yourself of your toxic emotions? How would you relate to the other side?" It's up to you to decide whether you are ready to let go of the grudge. If you feel ready to work through it, you will need to go through the journey in three stages.

The first stage is to bear witness to pain. This simply means to acknowledge a person's emotional pain, no matter how hard it is to accept. Begin by bearing witness to your own pain, then go through the same process to engage with the other side. See the pain, enter into it, and decipher its meaning. Seeing pain means looking for two aspects of emotional pain: *raw pain* and *suffering*. Raw pain is the gut-wrenching pain you feel when your romantic partner says, "I don't love you anymore." You feel that knot in your stomach, your chest tightens, or maybe your head begins to pound. Suffering is how you make sense of that pain. Suffering is what leads to the desire for revenge or the anger in holding a grudge.

Once you identify the emotional pain, you can begin to decipher its meaning. What is the origin of your pain? Did someone say or do something that injured your emotional well-being? Is there a single traumatic incident you can identify? Is there long-standing abuse? For example, if you feel a strong urge to avoid your boss who shot down your ideas, your pain may be telling you that you require more praise than you realized.

The second stage of working through emotional pain is to mourn the loss. Many conflicts involve loss: the divorce of a couple; siblings who spent

years without talking; armies who lose men in war. Mourning is essential; if you fail to mourn, you remain trapped in your painful emotions. So take emotional stock of your loss and come to terms with it. One of the best ways to do this is through conversation and expressing your emotions through language. Ask yourself: why is this loss so painful to me? How can I best make meaning of it? Discuss these questions with a trusted friend or journal your thoughts to put your feelings into words.

The final step is to contemplate forgiveness. This is the most difficult stage of the process. It is not quick and will require time, effort, patience, and the recognition that your motivation to forgive will ebb and flow. For example, you might resist forgiving your friend who betrays your trust for years, until suddenly your grudge softens one day. As you go through the process of forgiveness, first consider the pros and cons of forgiving and record them. Next, check with your gut: What would it *feel* like to release yourself from your grudge. Contemplate with what feels right and talk with someone you trust. Over time, clarity will emerge.

Reconfigure Your Relationship Using the SAS System

When it comes to improving your relations, you'll need to figure out how to solve the actual problems without compromising your core identity. When core identities come under threat, conflict can easily turn into a zero-sum battle: Either the other side bends to your identity, or you bend to theirs. Unfortunately, neither side is willing to betray their identity which brings the conflict to a stalemate. To truly resolve identity-based divisions, you'll need to reconfigure your relationship. To do this, Shapiro recommends using the SAS system.

There are three steps to the SAS system, the first is to clarify how identity is at stake. Take a young couple, Linda and Josh, whose marriage was struggling ever since their twin girls became old enough to know about Santa Claus. The problem was that Linda is Protestant and Josh is Jewish. As the holidays neared, Linda wanted to put up a Christmas tree but Josh refused. Eventually, their resentments for one another had grown so deep that a compromise seemed nearly impossible. The two must begin by identifying the parts of their identity that feel threatened.

For Linda, her mother died when she was just ten years old, and the Christmas tree began to represent her close relationship with her father. For Josh, he imagined the disappointment of his parents and grandparents, who would view a Christmas tree as a betrayal of Jewish rituals and values. Learning the root of the conflict allowed Linda and Josh to see why the other had been so resistant. The next step is to envision scenarios for harmonious coexistence. This step involves three stages. First, you must separate the identities. For Linda and Josh, this could mean dividing the house up and dedicating a specific area for Christmas decorations and celebrations.

The second stage is to assimilate. This means incorporating part of their identity into yours. For our couple, this could mean Linda could convert to

Josh's religious beliefs and become Jewish or vice versa. The final stage is synthesizing identities. This means redefining your relationship with the other side so your core identity and theirs coexist. You are separate and connected. Josh and Linda could buy a tree for their house, jointly decorate it with their kids, and each assign personal meaning to it: Linda could view it as a Christmas tree and Josh could view it as a festive Hanukkah decoration.

When reconfiguring your relationship, the final step is to evaluate which scenario best harmonizes your differences. Shapiro asked Josh and Linda, "Which scenario, or combination of scenarios, seems most compelling and feasible?" To begin answering this question, Linda and Josh had to weigh the pros and cons. By putting a Christmas tree in the home, Josh realized that resentment would slowly build and eventually make him question why he had betrayed his roots. In the end, the two agreed not to have a Christmas tree in their own home but to celebrate Christmas each year at Linda's father's house in Georgia. Linda would still get to experience Christmas with her father and their kids while still respecting Josh's beliefs and Jewish faith.

In the end, it is possible to negotiate the nonnegotiable. The SAS system allows you to detach your core identity from your relational identity to reconfigure your relationship. It's important to acknowledge that you cannot solve a problem from within it. But by applying the SAS system, you can step outside the conflict to resolve it.

Final Summary

After diving into the world of conflict resolution, you have been presented with the tools necessary to neutralize emotionally charged conflicts. It's time to put these ideas into practice and try them out to see what works in your particular conflict. Of course, reconciliation is not just a matter of social engineering; instead, your heart needs to be fully involved in the process. The spirit of reconciliation is ultimately what makes it work. The Tribes Effect will make it difficult for you to want a reconciliation, so if you truly want change, enlist your imagination to envision what can be. Next, small changes can make a big difference. Reconciliation can become a ripple effect that trickles into every aspect of your life: mending relationships with family members and colleagues can then spread to improve your community and even the world. So don't wait. Ask yourself, "What might I do now - today - to bring this conflict one step closer to resolution?" The journey begins within yourself, so begin today and negotiate the nonnegotiable.



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