



# Dwight Eisenhower's Dilemma and the Art of Managing Conflict

By Tim Wright

**T**he movie *The Darkest Hour* is a depiction of how Winston Churchill revitalized England's identity as a European power while engaged in crisis management with the Nazis. Churchill replaced Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain whose diplomatic style proved too weak and ineffective for handling the ambitious conqueror, Adolf Hitler. To destroy Hitler's Wehrmacht, Churchill formed an alliance with new world ally U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The United States joined Great Britain in the war after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, two years after Hitler invaded Poland. The man chosen to lead the military operations was Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces, Dwight Eisenhower, who would later become the 34th President of the United States.

Eisenhower was chosen for his abilities to plan military strategy, for statecraft and knowledge of foreign policy, who could influence the rigid personalities at the Pentagon and achieve results within the fluid political landscape in Washington DC. General Eisenhower's reputation as a superb administrator who could effectively organize people and resources would be severely tested during this conflict.

As Supreme Commander for the European theater in World War II, Eisenhower oversaw all commanders and troops for the allied countries and Europe: England, Free France, Canada, Australia, Poland, Norway, Denmark, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Luxembourg, South Africa, Belgium, the US, and Russia. He furnished military advice to President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Winston Churchill and the General Secretary of Russia, Joseph Stalin. This powerful troika had their own private, and often conflicting political agendas, strategic interests and aspirations in Europe and beyond.

Eisenhower conferred with the mercurial personalities of the top Allied commanding generals, all of whom sought their own personal glory and prestige. The two biggest personalities were American General George Patton and British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery. *To some degree General Douglas MacArthur as well, however, MacArthur was primarily limited to the tumultuous Axis Alliance conflicts raging in the Pacific.* Montgomery and Patton viewed each other with contempt and were envious of each other's celebrity and stature. Both men lobbied tenaciously for their armies to invade Berlin and defeat Hitler. This was a volatile territorial divisiveness that Eisenhower had to make cohesive.

Eisenhower faced more challenges. As plans were being made to attack Hitler, the impulsive General Patton incautiously advanced deeper into Germany without informing Eisenhower. Patton's army crossed the Rhine River, a calculated maneuver that threatened to violate an international pact between Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin. And Field Marshal Montgomery, who frequently criticized Eisenhower's leadership in the British newspapers, lobbied Churchill for the right to invade Berlin first, without Eisenhower's permission. Just days before the D-Day invasion of Normandy, with the actual date of the invasion undetermined due to bad weather conditions, President Roosevelt suffered a cerebral hemorrhage.

Eisenhower's dilemma was whose army would get the fame and glory by invading Berlin first. Patton's or Montgomery's? Eisenhower was unaware that Churchill had been pressuring the Pentagon to replace him with Field Marshal Montgomery as supreme commander. With President Roosevelt now laid to rest, Eisenhower made his decision. He called Joseph Stalin and gave the order. The Russian army would invade Berlin. Eisenhower's bold joint strategy of a simultaneous thrust, rallying the unified efforts of the allied armies closing in on Germany from all directions and the speed in which the Russian army could mobilize troops, tanks, artillery, and supplies from the eastern front to Berlin.

This was a monumental decision by Eisenhower that could have ruined his military career, his legacy, and later the presidency but it proved to be the correct decision and history has secured Eisenhower's stature as one of the great military conflict managers of the twentieth century.

What can we learn from "Ike's" ability to manage conflict? His story is as epic as Churchill's and the scope of this article is just a summary. The book *Feuding Allies: The Private Wars of the High Command* by William B. Breuer, though sensational at times, attempts to explore this topic more thoroughly.

My takeaway from this conflict is people get trapped inside organizational patterns that prohibit them from seeing the point of view of others. A good conflict manager has the advantage of seeing the conflict between two people from a broader perspective. The conflict manager encourages the two parties to step outside their organizational patterns to a view from above, or meta-perspective.

The conflict manager assesses the requirements and needs of each party and determines where their requirements overlap, and if not, where the overlap can occur if one or both parties are willing to make concessions. This incremental conversion process gradually merges the requirements of the two parties by demonstrating other alternatives to ruling authoritatively, such as persuasion, helping, empathy and omnidirectional thought.

Your organizational framework should be based on building an allegiance between people and purpose, not only to oneself. You can contribute to your own development and the development of others – at the same time. The framework should encourage (and reward) an awakening from any cultural trance that suggests the organization is not willing to change and the cultural pressures against improving oneself and others.

Your cultural framework does not need to be targeted to a specific demographic (e.g., *Millennials*), as even the oldest employees are as young as the newest thing they learn. Our framework allows all of us to be one age if we choose to be.

The greatest contribution employees can give management is more options and management should welcome many different points of view. More options generate better decisions. Ultimately, overcoming conflict is part of the framework of your organization whereby people combine positions but do not choose sides.



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