

# Conflict Continuum

Synopsis by Frank Rawland

The **Conflict Continuum** is a model developed by [University of Chicago](#) educator and theorist Andra Medea that seeks to explain how [individuals](#), small groups, [organizations](#), [families](#), [ethnicities](#), and even whole [nations](#) function when disputes arise between them. It posits that there are six types or levels of conflict, each operating under distinct rules: 1) *Problem Solving*; 2) *Domination*; 3) *Blind Behavior*; 4) *Tyranny/ Predation*; 5) *Chaos*; 6) *Rogue Messiah*.<sup>[1]</sup>

Each level moving from first to sixth is characterized by increasing degrees of separation from reality, and decreasing degrees of maturity, in this context, defined as the ability to control anger and settle differences without violence or destruction. Problem-solving behavior is based in reality and maturity, and is therefore more rational and mature than Domination. Domination is more rational and mature than Blind behavior, which is more rational and mature than the Rogue Messiah.<sup>[2]</sup>

However, each level moving from sixth to first is more capable than the one below it at forcing victory in a conflict. The Rogue Messiah overpowers Blind Behavior, Blind Behavior thwarts Domination, and Domination deadlocks Problem-solving.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Level One: Problem Solving

Adversaries at level one use negotiation, communication, brain-storming, or other collaborative skills to work toward equitable and/or mutually acceptable solutions. Facts are primary tools in making one's case. An attitude of flexibility prevails. Even when angered or upset, the parties to a dispute will try to exercise self-control and show a measure of respect for each other.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Level Two: Domination

Negotiation and listening skills become less effective, if not completely ineffective. One or both antagonists pursue their ends through power plays and psychological warfare to gain a position of superiority. They are rigid in holding to their views. Accusation (belittling remarks, slurs, insults: "You stupid..."), manipulation (flattery, false charm: "Trust me. Just trust me."), and whining/self pity ("You're so mean to me.") are

characteristic fighting tactics. Violation of boundaries, withholding of facts, denial, and temper tantrums or other failures of self-control are characteristic behaviors. Conflicts handled this way can seem endless because they are never truly resolved, and are vulnerable to re-igniting. <sup>[5]</sup>

## Level Three: Blind Behavior

Levels One and Two make up the usual range of human interaction. Individuals (or groups or nations) readily shift back and forth between them as circumstances change. They tend to use Problem-Solving when they are feeling secure, shift to Domination when frustrated or threatened, and shift back to problem-solving when they feel safe again. At level three people can't return to Problem-Solving, although negotiating ability still minimally exists. They become increasingly mired in unmanageable problems, often of their own making, because they are blind to how their own actions contribute to their situation. <sup>[6]</sup> Distinct patterns include repetitively destructive vicious circles, exercise of power without checks and balances or other limits, sincere belief in one's own lies, and collapse of boundaries are among this level's defining elements.

## Level Four: Tyranny/ Predation

Level Four is defined by felonies: behavior that is so destructive that societies go to great effort and cost to stop it. This includes all systems of abuse: massive overkill of one's opponent(s), rage seizures, entrenched hatreds/blood [feuds](#) (e.g.: the [Catholic - Protestant](#) conflict in [Northern Ireland](#), the [Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#) in the [Middle East](#)); acute [racism/sexism](#)/religious hostility; [alcoholism/addictive](#) disorders; [emotional abuse](#); [sexual abuse](#). <sup>[8]</sup>

### "Jekyll & Hyde" Effect

One of the more perverse characteristics of Level Three is the "[Jekyll & Hyde](#)" effect: tyrants/abusers have just enough contact with reality to maintain respectable appearances even as they grossly mistreat citizens, employees, or children. <sup>[9]</sup> Because most outsiders do not perceive anything amiss, the first signs of trouble will show up in victims. <sup>[10]</sup> Symptomatic behaviors include:

- **Isolation:** victims implicitly understand whatever they say about their abusers will not seem credible, and thus won't seek help even when potential help is in sight. This is also known as "the [bell jar](#)" effect, because it is as if abuse occurs in its own world behind a glass wall. <sup>[11]</sup>
- **Extreme reactions:** victims may be remarkably apathetic about their ill treatment for long periods of time and then abruptly lash out. <sup>[12]</sup>
- **Abnormal survival skills:** victims withdraw or turn to rage, abasement, or gross compliance, most of which play into the hands of the abuser. <sup>[13]</sup>

## Level Five: Chaos

A broad-based breakdown in basic law and order, that is so corrupt and draining that people lose all faith in authority. Neither the schools, police, courts, army, or government can be trusted in basic matters.

People will flee chaotic systems. If a family turns to chaos, members leave as soon as they are able. A business reduced to chaos will collapse. A urban neighborhood or province may be reduced to chaos by the emergence of drug lords over more normal authorities, such as mayors or local leaders.

## Level Six: Rogue Messiah

The Rogue Messiah is a leader of destructive proclivities and questionable sanity. As postulated by Medea, they are rare but uniquely dangerous to friends and foes alike. All start out as crackpots in search of a following. There are many potential candidates, most of whom fail. The career arc of those who succeed generally exhibits a pattern of rapid growth, accumulation, overreach, and then sudden collapse. During the growth and accumulation phase they appear to be unstoppable, because opponents are almost always caught flat-footed by their methods and respond in ineffective ways. By the overreach phase Rogue Messiahs have built up a portfolio of atrocities—[character assassination](#), [murder](#), [genocide](#), and even open warfare—that causes outsiders to bring force against them. External opposition brings about their defeat.

### Personal character

The personal character of Rogue Messiahs include most of the following traits:

- **Grandiosity/Megalomania:**

They make no small plans; their ambition running all the way to world conquest. They invent a grandiose picture of themselves and adopt flamboyant honors and titles. (e.g.: The full name [Mobuto Sese Seko](#) of [Zaire](#) gave himself was "Mobutu Sese Seko Nkuku Ngbendu wa Za Banga," which roughly translated meant "the all-powerful warrior who goes from conquest to conquest leaving fire in his wake"<sup>[14]</sup>)

- **Genius/insanity:**

To observers they seem interchangeably brilliant and insane. (e.g.: In 1937, [Adolf Hitler](#)'s personal physician Dr. Ferdinand Sauerbruch assessed his patient to be on the boundary between the two.<sup>[15]</sup>)

- **Sociopathy:**

They can no longer make normal distinctions between right and wrong. They either do not care or do not understand that the more outrageous their actions, the

more they will invite reprisals. This inability to grasp cause and effect will come to infect followers as well.

- **Paranoia**
- **Charisma**

## **Manipulation skills**

The skills which help them gain influence and followers include:

- **Creative opportunism:**

They will tap into whatever dispute is at hand, set themselves up as a leading authority, and build from there. If there are no political issues in contention they will make one up. If none of the available political or religious ideologies are sufficiently demagogic they will invent their own. (e.g.: Hitler emphasized Germany's grievances, [Charles Manson](#) tried to provoke a race war, and [Osama bin Laden](#) has selectively drawn from [Islam](#) in an effort to ignite a global holy war).

- **Specialized media mastery:**

Their message will come across forcefully in some media forum or other, but not in all media. Once they've identified their strength they will specialize. (e.g.: Osama bin Laden has done well with videotaped communiqués, but not live video. Hitler performed well at mass rallies and on radio. [Joe McCarthy](#) performed well on live TV.)

## **Growth and power**

The qualities which facilitate their rapid growth and accumulation of power include:

- **Intensive, sequential mode of attack:**

They move rapidly from battle to battle, feeding off each to launch them onto the next. By contrast, most people in a fight will act out for a period of time, then disengage and regroup. This disparity in style is what gives an Rogue Messiah an early appearance of invincibility.

- **Eerie fortitude:**

They will not surrender. Nor will outside pressure diminish their influence over followers unless contact between them is broken.

- **Inability to negotiate:**

They may engage in the process of negotiation, and may seemingly accept the terms of negotiated agreements, but the spirit of compromise is absent. By definition, they thrive on conflict and have no interest in resolving them. They will either move on to a different arena, or simply not follow through. (e.g.: Hitler invaded [Czechoslovakia](#) in 1939 after signing the [Munich Agreement](#) in 1938.<sup>[16]</sup>)

- **Appropriation of resources:**

They vacuum up most or all of the available assets in their domain, which sometimes can be an entire country. Often they will claim to be acting on behalf of the poor or disadvantaged. In reality they target the middle and upper class because that is where the most wealth is concentrated.

## Defeat

Factors contributing in their downfall include:

- **Administrative incompetence:**

The intensity with which they lead others disguises their inability to manage day-to-day operations or solve logistical or technical problems. For that they are wholly dependent on more capable subordinates.

- **Scorched earth tactics:**

They have neither anguish nor hesitation about sacrificing the lives of supporters. When opponents close in they will order the demolition of homes, industries, and even cities if any are under their control. (e.g.: in the closing months of [WWII](#) in [Europe](#), Hitler ordered the destruction of all German industrial infrastructure.<sup>[17]</sup> [David Koresh](#) killed some federal agents and then burned down his own compound.<sup>[18]</sup>) As relentlessly as they attack enemies, in essence they end up destroying their own side.

## References

- [Andra Medea, Conflict Unraveled: Fixing Problems at Work and in Families](#) (Pivot Point Press, 2004) pp. 25–57
- [WBEZ Worldview: The Conflict Continuum](#)