

The Pinch Model

“Somewhere along the way of human interaction, conflict has gotten a bad name.”

Kaleel Jamison

That’s what Kaleel Jamison used to say about it, because conflict—while totally and categorically inevitable—is deeply associated with feelings of avoidance, negativity, discomfort, and bad endings. When we think of conflict, we think of winners and losers. We imagine that dealing with a conflict will take a great deal of time and energy and result in greater distance between the parties—and is therefore best avoided at all costs.

But what if we changed those associations to the positive feelings we have on the other side of conflict?

When conflicts are resolved successfully, our relationships are enriched. We feel closer to the other person. We move forward knowing more than we did before, which can

help improve future interactions. Our productivity increases as we can stop wasting time avoiding the issue or the person and trying to find ways to work around the conflict.

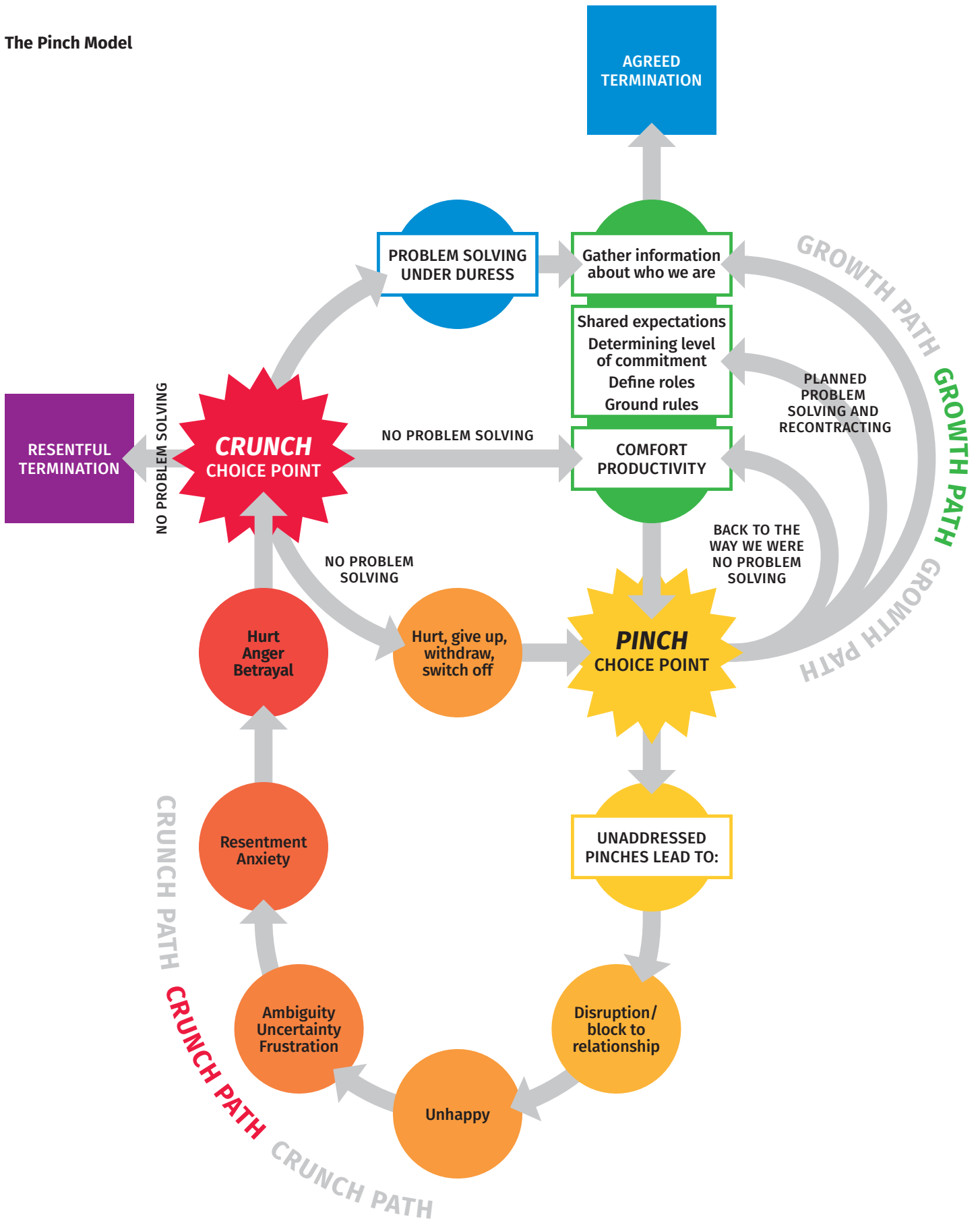
In fact, Kaleel would often say that on the other side of conflict is not more conflict, but greater closeness.

That’s the irony and dilemma John Sherwood and John Glidewell sought to address when they developed what

we call the “Pinch” Model. Knowing that conflicts, misunderstandings, and disagreements will always arise in human interactions, why don’t we prepare ourselves to effectively address them, rather than ignoring them?

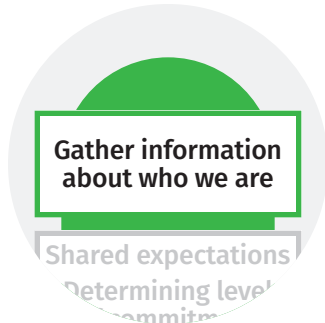
Conflicts are inevitable, so it makes sense to develop the skills to resolve them. Equally important, we must also learn to detect a conflict before it becomes all-consuming and damaging to our interactions, our teams, and our productivity. In this article, we describe a preventative conflict-resolution model that helps people address conflicts in a proactive and relationship-enhancing way that leads to better understanding between partners in conflict, faster surfacing and solving of problems, and overall higher performance.

The Pinch Model

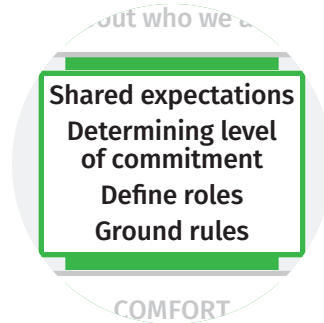


The Cycle

When Sherwood and Glidewell studied how people interact, they discovered a distinct pattern. They found that when two or more parties enter a relationship, each person follows essentially the same process.



Gathering information about who we are



Shared expectations, roles and ground rules



Comfort and productivity

When you and I first meet, we begin getting to know one another. We collect information about each other, explicitly and implicitly, that shapes our relationship and how we will work together. And with that information we, consciously or unconsciously, start anticipating how each of us will behave. We are constantly collecting data through our verbal and non-verbal interactions. As we check out each other's behaviors, we are forming and revising our thoughts and feelings about each other and our interpretations of each other's behaviors.

This initial "data collection" forms the foundation for our working together. We begin to establish expectations for each other. As we are learning about one another, we set expectations about our level of commitment to each other, about how we will work together, about our roles, and about our ground rules for interacting. As we develop greater clarity, we start to build trust and confidence in our working together. We gain a degree of comfort with each other.

Once we feel like we know what to expect from each other, we settle into our new relationship. We begin to hum. There is less questioning about what we each are here to do; we understand each other's roles and how we will work together. As we meet each other's expectations, our relationship becomes stable. That's because when we each do what we say we're going to do, it enhances our comfort and trust, and we can focus our energies on our tasks and achieve our greatest level of productivity.



Disruption leads to a "Pinch"

Inevitably, however, situations change. The environment shifts or new information becomes available to one or both of us. In reacting to the new situation, one or both of us will knowingly or unknowingly break the other's expectations.

Inevitably, there will be missed expectations. Repeated misses or a big miss will lead to a disruption in our process and our relationship. The disruption could be as simple as someone coming late to a meeting, or one person assuming the other was going to do X when they instead did Y. The disruption may come from a change in status (e.g., someone gets promoted) or personal situation (e.g., a marriage or new child) or organizational structure (a re-organization, a new manager or team member, a merger with another organization).



The "Pinch" as a choice point

Think about what happens if someone pinches you. It captures your attention and might feel painful for a second, but the pain goes away pretty quickly. The same is true with misunderstandings or disagreements or a disruption in a relationship.

All too often, our response to a pinch is to ignore it. We make excuses for ourselves or the other person:

Maybe I'm being too sensitive?

I must have misunderstood what they meant.

I know they are overworked.

Or we choose not to raise the issue because we are concerned about how we will be seen:

I don't want to rock the boat.

Better to stay quiet and hope it doesn't happen again.

There are times when a pinch really is just a momentary disruption that can be ignored. When the disruption is from something that happens once but doesn't occur again, letting it go and moving on may be the right strategy. (You know it really is nothing if you are not thinking about the issue a day or so later and it is truly forgotten.)



Unaddressed Pinch leads to a CRUNCH

Most pinches don't go away on their own, no matter how much we pretend they don't exist. In fact, they often fester and compound. An unresolved pinch creates resentments that make people less likely to extend benefit of the doubt and good will, meaning other actions and behaviors are now seen in a more critical and negative light. Behaviors that might have previously gone unnoticed now add fuel to the fire. This leads to a "crunch"—a conflict that can feel much larger than the initial missed expectation.

A Pinch/Crunch Scenario

When Sherwood and Glidewell studied how people interact, they discovered a distinct pattern. They found that when two or more parties enter a relationship, each person follows essentially the same process.

Jackie joins a new team and begins reporting to Jane.

- 1** They set mutual expectations about their roles and how they each like to operate to do their best work.
- 2** Jane and Jackie begin working together, and their initial interactions result in comfortable productivity. Their expectations are being met, the work is getting done and things are going well.
- 3** Inevitably, an expectation is not met. Let's say Jackie missed a deadline (a pinch). Jane initially decides not to address it and tries to move back to comfort and productivity.
- 4** Jackie misses a few more deadlines. Jane is becoming more frustrated and not quite sure how to address the issue (i.e., the pinch).
- 5** Jane begins to question Jackie's commitment and ability to do her job. She becomes more and more frustrated and starts to avoid Jackie and is colder when she does engage with her. She's annoyed with Jackie about things that never bothered her before. Their interactions and communications become less effective.
- 6** Jackie knows she's missing deadlines, but she doesn't want to tell Jane she's overwhelmed. She feels what is expected of her is unreasonable and begins to resent that Jane doesn't recognize how challenging her workload is.
- 7** The two start to resent each other. Both feel let down by the other. Jane and Jackie both are feeling a deep sense of hurt.
- 8** Jane wonders if the partnership she had with Jackie initially was even real. In fact, her "movie" is that Jackie is intentionally missing deadlines and does not believe that the work they are doing together is as important as other projects she has. Jane is feeling betrayed.
- 9** Meanwhile, Jackie is feeling helpless and unsure about how to address the situation in which she herself is feeling less and less competent. Because she has been rushing her work, losing confidence in herself, and feeling under pressure knowing that Jane is upset with her, she is making mistakes, which only compounds the problem.
- 10** Jane is furious. Jackie is anxious. Their problem grows in almost every interaction. They have reached a CRUNCH POINT. It is now a choice point with several options:



OPTION 1

Try to go back to the way we were – No problem solving

Jane can't take it any longer and it is impacting her work. She confronts Jackie. Jackie apologizes, and shares that she has been overwhelmed. They each take a step back, are glad they confronted the issue, and Jackie promises she will do better. But there is no problem solving, and at some point Jackie misses a deadline since the issue of her workload was never addressed. And so the cycle continues. (Pinch – Disruption—Crunch)



OPTION 2

Hurt, give up, switch off – No Problem Solving

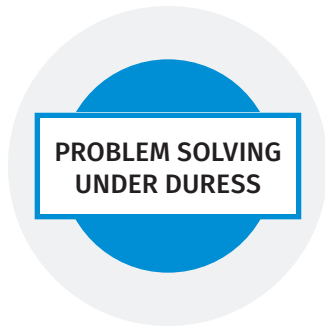
Jackie feels as if she has no options. Instead of engaging with Jane and trying to figure out a way to address her sense of being overwhelmed and not able to deliver on time, she decides that there is nothing she can do. Ultimately, she decides to keep her head down and plod along, but from time to time she experiences being angry, upset, and feeling trapped and hopeless.



OPTION 3

Resentful Termination

Jackie and Jane decide to have a conversation, but there is not much sense from either of them that the situation is reparable. Jackie explains that she's been under too much pressure, but Jane feels the problem is too severe to be mitigated, she is done. Jane has decided that Jackie is just not delivering, won't deliver, and the relationship has been harmed for good. It is time to let her go. Jackie is terminated, but unfortunately there has been no real conversation about what happened and what each person's part was in the breakdown. If Jane doesn't fire her, Jackie quits out of frustration. In either case, the result is a resentful termination. Jackie leaves, but neither Jane nor Jackie are any smarter about how to avoid such a situation in the future. Jane just chalks it up to Jackie being a "bad hire." But when her next hire again disappoints, Jane finds herself in another frustrating pinch/crunch cycle. Jackie finds herself overwhelmed at the next job and chalks it up to another bad partnership.



OPTION 4

Problem Solving Under Duress

Jackie and Jane decide they need to address this situation, but it feels like a lot of damage to their partnership and to Jackie’s credibility has already been done. It is clear the issue isn’t going to resolve itself, so they know they must address it. With a great deal of trepidation and a lot of emotion and blaming they decide to have the conversation.

They discuss the issues and after much discussion, with the help of a third-party team member or HR partner, they decide it is time to revisit their way of working together to clarify their expectations and ground rules and to problem-solve how to deal with Jackie’s work load. They recontract what each person will do differently in order to not have a crunch situation again.

Note that when we try to end a disruption or conflict by saying, “It won’t happen again,” or “Don’t let it happen again,” without a full discussion of expectations and how they were missed, choice point will be lost, the relationship will be closed off from change, and we will be starting down the path toward a crunch.



OPTION 5

Agreed Termination

At this stage, though they both understand what happened, why there were missed expectations, and what were the mitigating factors, they might decide that the best solution for each of them and the organization would be for Jackie to leave the organization (agreed termination). If that is decided, however, Jackie and Jane each learn how they could have had more productive conversations earlier to have had a different outcome. Jackie and Jane leave the conversation smarter.

Breaking the Cycle

Pinches are inevitable. Crunches are not.

Sherwood and Glidewell point out that the initial “Pinch” provides an important choice point and a path to growth and problem-solving without all the emotional baggage and waste that accrue when conflicts are ignored. The pinch point can be seen as a “system-danger” alert that provides an opportunity to gather new information, set new expectations, and continuously improve how we are working together.

When a disruption happens, it may be a signal that we as individuals and/or our organization as a system may need to examine or change expectations and ground rules.

Clearly, addressing pinches is preferable to addressing crunches. But to do so, we will have to raise our thresholds for anxiety and uncertainty so we can address disagreements and misunderstandings when they first arise. We will have to reconsider our old ideas around disruption and conflict. We will need to see that initial feeling that something is not right as an opportunity to strengthen our teams and improve our work, and to stop seeing and addressing pinches or conflict as harmful.

Nothing we can do will ever prevent disruptions or conflicts or pinches. But if we’re willing to commit ourselves to renegotiating our expectations, we can have more productive conflicts that leave us with improved relationships and more productive partnerships at work.

Resolution

The Pinch

Pinches are opportunities for renegotiation. If Jane and Jackie had taken the pinch of Jackie's first missed deadline as a signal to revisit their situation, they would have been able to renegotiate their mutual expectations based on current reality rather than pre-launch projections that may have been based on overly optimistic hopes. The renegotiated expectations could have set both Jane and Jackie up for a much more satisfying and successful work relationship.

When we're confronted by pinches and we choose to address them, we have more control and choice over how our relationships will change as a result of them. We can avoid crises and the pressure to return to the way things used to be. We won't have to make as many negotiations under fire or duress.

Although this scenario describes a work partnership, pinches can and do happen in all relationships, including those between friends, family members and romantic partners. In a romantic relationship, the failure to move past the Crunch point might lead to a separation or divorce. In a friend or family relationship, it might mean long-term estrangement.

What happens in organizations when pinches are identified and a planned problem-solving model is in place?

- People start to communicate better, more often, and more effectively.
- People begin to anticipate that when new information enters the system, it will be shared quickly so roles and expectations can be updated and renegotiated where necessary.
- Pinches are identified as a normal part of day-to-day interactions and addressed when they first arise.

Many organizations that have adopted the "Pinch" planned renegotiation model make it a standard practice to begin staff meetings by asking if anyone has a pinch that needs to be addressed or resolved. Pinches are seen as normative. It is understood that proactive problem-solving creates a process of continuous improvement, of making problems visible sooner, and faster decision-making.

When it is understood that people will speak up when they are feeling a pinch, they stop walking on eggshells, avoiding misunderstandings and disagreements. In fact, they seek out conversations on pinches to strengthen partnerships and deal with continuous change.

Practice helps. Identifying pinches and knowing when and how to renegotiate takes practice. But when addressing pinches is the new norm, conflict no longer gets a bad name but opens the doorway to higher performance.

How to Work a Pinch: 8-Steps

- 1** Start with a joining mindset. Assume good intent and that you will be working together to problem-solve.
- 2** Identify what the pinch is.
- 3** Share feelings first. Describe what, from your perspective, occurred and what the impact was on you.
- 4** Own your part of the pinch. Don't get defensive. Be willing to lean into discomfort and have the honest conversation. Don't assume the intent of the other person; give the other person the benefit of the doubt, do not judge, let them tell their story. Work to understand the other person's experience and impact.
- 5** Clarify expectations and any unspoken rules.
- 6** Problem-solve options to address the pinch and recontract. How will each of you be different? What will we each stop, start, do more of in this partnership/relationship? What will you do to make the partnership/relationship better going forward?
- 7** Follow up. Identify a date to meet and check how the new agreement is working. Recognize that in that follow-up meeting you might need to find additional behaviors and actions to improve the solution. Recognize that to build trust you each will be expected to do what you say you would do.
- 8** Celebrate! Appreciate each other's hard work and willingness to raise and address the issue/pinch. Let each other know what you found helpful in the discussion.