

# CONTAINING THE CORROSION AND CONTAGION OF CONTENTION

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*This article is a preview of Jim Lukaszewski's next IABC web-based teleseminar, “Managing Contention: Building relationships, reducing anxiety, bringing constituencies to agreement, waging calmness (the opposite of contention),” on Wednesday, 24 March 2010, from 12 to 1:30 p.m. EDT. Please visit [www.krm.com/IABC](http://www.krm.com/IABC) to find out more about the program and to register.*

Contention is the highly emotional and often irrational struggle between contenders who raise issues, questions, and urgency, and defenders who explain, describe, and answer the issues raised by contenders. As you can tell right away, it is necessary to understand the perspective of each individual, party or force in a controversial and contentious situation.

One definition of contention is opposing the powerful for the benefit of the powerless. This is the definition that would warm the hearts of journalists, plaintiff’s attorneys and many politicians (the Contenders).

The Defenders’ definition of contention often amounts to irrational, misguided, often mistaken opposition by people with personal agendas. Already, you can see where this discussion has to go. In short, contention is the lack of or resistance to agreement.

Contention can arise internally or externally—or from both sides.. Here is a list of common external causes of contention.

- Active critics
- Activist action
- Angry neighbors (upset communities)
- Change
- Customer irritation
- Disgruntled employees
- Dissident board members
- Facility site opposition
- Intense competition
- Labor unrest
- Media attacks
- Negative, accusatory, unfounded allegations
- On-line activism (electronic bullying)
- Problem public officials

The list of external causes is matched by a list of internal causes:

- Acquisition/merger/takeover
- Benefit reduction
- New CEO
- Private to public status

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|------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| • Building or expanding a facility | • Public to private status |
| • Closing a facility               | • Relocation/off-shoring   |
| • Culture change                   | • Restructuring            |
| • Downsizing/layoffs/restructuring | • Succession               |
| • Labor activity                   | • Whistleblowing           |

Even with this much of an introduction, it would seem appropriate for you to take a moment at this point to make a note of some of your own sources of contention, wherever they may originate.

<b>Your lexicon of contention</b>

Another way to look at contention is to directly analyze the perspective of both internal and external audiences on any given issue. One of the approaches I like best is what I call “Assumption/Reality Testing.” In this process, the assumptions surrounding an idea, decision, process or plan are arrayed in alphabetical order on the left-hand side of a sheet of paper. The realities they reflect are arrayed on the right-hand side. This can lead to a marvelous and strategic discussion that, in many cases, can help clarify both sides and, thereby, enhance the opportunity to get to agreement faster. Here’s an example of this approach, what I call an “Effect/Cause Analysis” of the attitudes of Contesters versus the attitudes of Defenders.

<b>Effect / cause analysis</b>	
<p><b><i>Contester position/allegations</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Betrayal</li> <li>• Deception</li> <li>• Ignored</li> <li>• Targeted</li> <li>• Defenseless</li> <li>• Humiliation</li> <li>• Hopelessness</li> <li>• Victimization</li> </ul>	<p><b><i>Defender response/interpretations</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Too early to tell”</li> <li>• Limited information</li> <li>• “No need to know”</li> <li>• Attack weaknesses</li> <li>• “Do anything we please”</li> <li>• Discredit them</li> <li>• Benefits outweigh risks</li> <li>• Irrational</li> </ul>

We do know what it takes to resolve contentious situations and, interesting enough, having worked in many cultures, it is surprising how consistent these ingredients of agreement are, whatever your history, culture or religious beliefs:

- Promptly do what the community and those affected really expect.
- Make decisions based on sound assumptions.
- Maximize face time and personal contact.
- Practice openness.
- Assign individuals in your organization (and in the community) who care; who can explain technicalities in simple, positive terms; are good communicators; and, where possible, are someone the community activists and victims can respect.
- Impose trustworthy, independent local oversight.

Perhaps the most powerful technique in reducing contention—so agreements can be arrived at more promptly—is a set of principles that guides your contention-reduction response. If applied by one side or the other, these principles can ultimately determine the outcome of the situation. Here are the principles of agreement building and contention reduction.

1. Take a positive tone:
  - Reduce or eliminate the use of all negative phrases, emotional language, and negative writing and talk.
  - Avoid unseemly, unnecessary button-pushing.
2. Use a constructive approach:
  - Adopt the philosophy of outcome-focused negotiation. This means negotiating about today and tomorrow, insofar as possible, ignoring or leaving yesterday out of discussions, strategies and decision making.
  - Arguing the past blocks out the future.
3. Actively address the most highly emotional, contentious issues first:
  - Until these issues are acknowledged and recognized for their corrosive, invasive, and destructiveness, they perpetuate and getting to an agreement will be extremely difficult.
4. Stick to the facts as you know them; avoid metaphors and analogies, or any other device that tries to translate the situation into another context:
  - Deal with the real.
  - One or the other (Contender or Defender) will be confused by these translation attempts, which than often causes the breakdown of further conversations and negotiation.

5. Do your homework:

- Find success stories that dramatically and poignantly illustrate the direction things need to head, or upon which agreement can be modeled and further defined.

6. Stay the course:

- Contentiousness is generally resolved by the determination of one of the parties to find a resolution that will satisfy, mitigate or perhaps neutralize the contentiousness that both parties face.
- Whether contentious issues explode on the public scene or remain largely private, most cultures want resolution for both parties to occur quickly, or set aside disputes and differences and deal with them at a later time.

Resolving contentious situations requires that they must be run down and ground down until an agreement becomes the best alternative, option or destination.