

# Lessons for Work, Law, & Life on Handling Conflict



BY BRENDAN KENNY, HELLMUTH & JOHNSON

Conflict is a fact of life—especially in law. Legal conflicts, like war, are serious and costly. Good attorneys know this. They don't rush to battle; instead, they weigh every option, plan carefully, and seek peace. This mindset helps clients avoid unnecessary fights and focus on what matters most. And while some see only stress and struggle, effective attorneys see opportunity for growth, partnership, and even humor. This approach, rooted in practical skills and the principles of OptimalWork (which I discussed in my last article), also offers lessons for anyone facing conflict at work or home.

## The “Dead or Alive Rat” Prison Conditions Case

I'll begin with an example of growing too fond of conflict. One of the more memorable cases from my time as a Deputy Attorney General in the Correctional Law Section of the California Attorney General's Office began as a class action involving prison condition. But it became a fight over a rat. It devolved into a heated dispute over whether a rat found in a cell block was dead or alive. Each side argued fiercely, as if the answer would decide the entire case. The irony was that it was unclear which outcome—dead or alive—would actually help either side. Looking back, it's comical that so much energy was spent on a detail that, in the grand scheme, did little to serve the real interests of justice or the people involved. That moment is a reminder to me that it's easy to get sidetracked by small battles and lose sight of what truly matters for the client and the cause.

## True Partnership with Clients

Even in conflict, respect and camaraderie matter. Good attorneys fight hard for their clients but never lose sight of their shared humanity. That is because effective attorneys understand that they can't effectively represent their clients if all they do is squabble with the other side. They listen, explain, and make sure clients understand each step. This partnership builds trust and helps clients feel supported, even when the path is uncertain.

But keeping this all in perspective isn't easy. There have been many times in my career when I became so immersed in a contentious legal fight that I momentarily lost sight of my true purpose—getting the best result for my client. This happens when I allow a legal dispute to become personal; where every motion and objection feels like a battle I have to win. Fortunately, when this happens, I've learned to step back and ask: “What does my client actually need?” Then I realize that my competitive drive is overshadowing the bigger picture. My client needs a practical solution, not a trophy from petty skirmishes. My experience continues to teach me that I must always keep my client's end goal at the center, no matter how intense the conflict becomes.

## Planning and Preparation: Winning Before the Fight

Attorneys are planners by trade. Before entering a negotiation or court, they map out possible scenarios and prepare responses, knowing that careful planning reduces surprises and builds confidence for both attorney and client. Haven't we all heard (who knows if he said it?) the Abraham Lincoln for writing for a long letter: that he didn't have time to write a short one? This highlights a truth: effective planning in law takes time and effort, but it is essential for clarity and good outcomes. Good planning also helps reduce unnecessary conflict by anticipating issues and addressing them before they escalate. When agreements are clear and expectations are set early, there is less room for misunderstanding or costly disputes down the road. In the end, investing the time to plan well saves everyone time, money, and stress.

## Mutual Trust: Clients Need Redirection Too

Effective attorneys know that clients can easily get caught up in conflict for its own sake, losing sight of what truly matters. In the heat of a dispute, emotions often take over, and clients may focus on winning every argument or proving a point, rather than reaching a practical solution. The attorney's role is to redirect that energy, helping clients refocus on their real goals—like resolving the case efficiently or protecting important relationships. By asking clarifying questions and reminding clients of the bigger picture, attorneys help them avoid getting bogged down in petty disagreements or costly battles that don't serve their interests. This approach not only saves time and resources but also leads to better outcomes and less stress for everyone involved. Ultimately, effective attorneys act as guides, ensuring that clients stay grounded in reality and make decisions that align with their true priorities, rather than being swept away by conflict for conflict's sake.

## Reframing: Finding Opportunity in Conflict

In my previous article, I discussed the OptimalWork approach and its practical value for attorneys and clients alike. One of OptimalWork's core principles is reframing. Here, that means deliberately choosing to see conflict not as a threat, but as an opportunity for growth and positive change. When attorneys and clients embrace reframing, they can look beyond the stress or frustration of a dispute and instead ask, “What can we learn or improve from this situation?” This shift in perspective allows both sides to discover creative solutions and build trust, even when emotions run high. Rather than getting stuck in the negative aspects of conflict, reframing opens the door to collaboration and personal development. Ultimately, seeing opportunity in conflict helps everyone involved move closer to their true goals, rather than simply reacting to challenges as they arise.



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