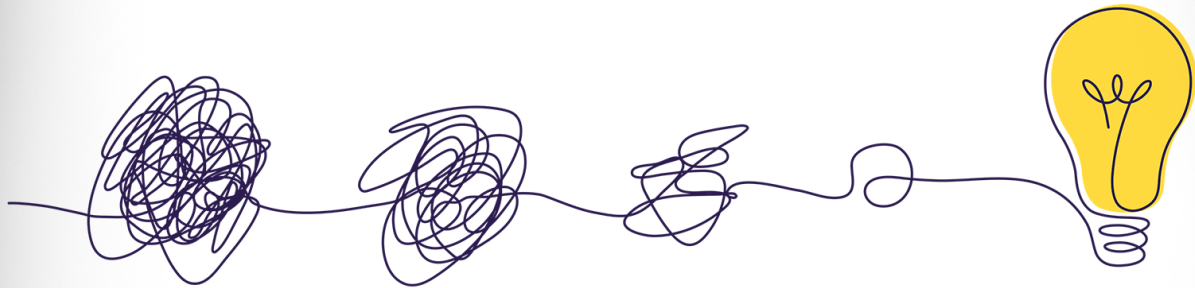


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CLARITY

Business Wisdom to Work Less and Achieve More

JIM VASELOPULOS

PRAISE FOR CLARITY

“In an era when business advice is often loud and insistent, this book is a refreshing change. Its quiet wisdom will help you see your professional challenges and opportunities more clearly and find a pathway to greater success and meaning.”

– Daniel H. Pink, #1 New York Times best-selling author of *To Sell is Human*, *Drive*, and *The Power of Regret*

“Exceptionally relevant and as precisely focused on a leader’s greatest challenge as its ambitious title. Jim Vaselopulos’s *Clarity* is a common-sense primer on the things business leaders face daily. Every story resonated brilliantly.”

– Stan McChrystal, Founder & CEO,
McChrystal Group General, US Army (Ret)

“What sets visionary leaders apart from the rest of us? *Clarity*. Jim Vaselopulos brings you on a captivating journey to unlock your power and influence so that people will be eager to join in bringing your great ideas to life.”

– Zoe Chance, author of *Influence Is Your Superpower*

“Clarity is the foundation that supports excellence at all levels of an organization. Jim Vaselopulos’ book *Clarity* includes wonderful depictions of how to serve your customers, engage your employees, and build true leadership within your organization.”

– Horst Schulze, co-founder of The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company

“Anyone who actually wants to become an effective leader in business should read this insightful book. Jim Vaselopulos weaves together a set of engaging stories that shed light on organizational complexities and leadership challenges while leading you in recognizing your own challenges and gaining the clarity to resolve them. You will see some part of yourself in every chapter, every section, perhaps even every page -- and find wisdom that leads you to success.”

– B. Joseph Pine II, coauthor of, *The Experience Economy: Competing for Customer Time, Attention, and Money*

“Jim’s book *Clarity* is delightfully refreshing in the way it walks you through the journeys of three fictional characters, each with a different business dilemma. This unique format is very powerful and displays how interpersonal relationships and influence are critical skill sets for business success. The format is also very impactful in that it takes complex concepts such as wisdom and clarity and makes them approachable and attainable.”

– Robert Cialdini, New York Times best-selling author of *Influence and Pre-Suasion*

“The foundation for success, especially in demanding conditions, depends upon an ability to discard what is unimportant and focus on what is truly important. I learned these lessons as a fighter pilot, both in training and in combat. Jim’s book *Clarity* contains the foundation and the methodology for business leaders to strip away distractions and focus on issues that will move their businesses forward.”

– Kim “KC” Campbell, Colonel, U.S. Air Force (Retired) and author of *Flying in the Face of Fear: A Fighter Pilot’s Lessons on Leading with Courage*

“When I started Jim’s book, I was struck by the bold promise made in the introduction - you’ll “grow wiser, work less and win big in business.” It didn’t take long to realize Jim delivers masterfully! *CLARITY* is loaded with actionable directives. Big thumbs up!”

– Don Yaeger, 11-time New York Times best-selling author

“I found this book to be a refreshing approach to business books and an easy read. The stories are realistic, engaging, and instructive. As the Queen of Clarity, I was delighted to see the importance of questions in each of the stories. Jim’s book clearly demonstrates the many disciplines leaders can use to unleash the power of their teams to achieve better and faster results.”

– Ann Latham, author of *The Power of Clarity*,
The Disconnect Principle, and *The Clarity Papers*

“This is not an ordinary business book. It is not a summary of client interviews, personal successes, or standard consultant advice. Rather, it is a highly readable set of stories and case studies told by fictional characters. The case studies all come together in a seminal final section that brims with insight and inspiration. You will want to spend an evening by the fireplace with this book.”

– Kim Cameron, William Russell Kelly
Professor Emeritus of Management & Organizations
Ross School of Business and Professor Emeritus of Higher
Education School of Education University of Michigan

“I’m confident Jim Vaselopulos’s *Clarity* will become a go-to guide for professionals. Filled with business lessons from his decades of experience, he makes it digestible and entertaining for the reader by illustrating everyday problems—and effective solutions—into well-crafted, inspiring stories. A must-read for anyone looking to advance their career.”

– Andrew LaCivita, award-winning author of
Interview Intervention and *The Hiring Prophecies*

“In his new book, Jim shares his hard-earned wisdom in a compelling and enjoyable manner, offering clarity to both current and future leaders, particularly when faced with complex dilemmas. This book will undoubtedly help you maximize your efforts to achieve greater success!”

– Jan Rutherford, Founder, Self-Reliant Leadership®

“In SEAL training we teach our BUD/S candidates to take on the hardest tasks and the biggest goals. We do this by taking seemingly impossible tasks and breaking them down into manageable elements that are easier to understand and master. That is exactly what Jim does with his book *Clarity*. With effective storytelling, compelling case studies, and an organized process, Jim explains how anyone hoping to better understand their business can perform under pressure and chart a clear path forward for them and their business.”

– Stephen Drum, author of *Life on the X*, founder of Breaching Leadership, Master Chief, US Navy SEAL (Ret)

“You can’t achieve clarity without curiosity, and the way George’s story unfolds throughout the pages of this book piques that needed curiosity. But it doesn’t just leave you hanging there, it will lead you through a disciplined process by which assumptions were pressure tested and facts were balanced with emotions. This book is both entertaining and educational—a unique take on the modern business book.”

– Harris III, Bestselling Author, Storyteller, and Entrepreneur

“Jim is a deep, strategic thinker, and this book illuminates his thought process to help businesspeople refine and improve their problem-solving skills and outcomes, as well as their approach to living a more fulfilling life.”

– Doug Marconnet - Managing Director, Bridgewood Advisors Inc.
(Specialists in Mergers & Acquisitions)

“I’ve been a fan of Jim Vaselopulos for years! He has done a remarkable job of capturing the emotions that entrepreneurs, CEOs, and business leaders experience through powerful storytelling. The situations were tangible and relevant to anyone who is in a leadership position, or aspires to be. The mixture of insightful business content makes this book necessary reading for any business leader seeking wisdom and clarity.”

– Paul Darley, Chairman, CEO & President, W.S. Darley & Co.,
author of *Sold! The Art of Relationship Sales*

“In his book *Clarity*, Jim Vaselopulos shows how to truly achieve more with less. The pages overflow with practical insights and methods for reducing noise and confusion and optimizing output. Jim is an expert at asking insightful and incisive questions, and *Clarity* is a masterclass in learning from him how to create clarity in your life.”

– Patrick Emmons - Founder & CEO of DragonSpears

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8

CONFLICT

We can dream of a world without conflict, but it is entirely unrealistic. Conflict is, and always will be, part of the human condition. The absence of conflict is neither peace nor harmony. The absence of conflict is apathy. This is why conflict should not be avoided, but rather why it should be understood and embraced. Conflict is a necessary part of how any idea gets sharper, any product gets better, and any business gets stronger.

While conflict is undesirable and messy, it is quite simple to understand. It has three fundamental components. At least two people, with at least two opinions and a reluctance to compromise. If any of these three components are missing, you do not have conflict, but rather, a discussion or a negotiation. It is the nature of the final element, the reluctance to compromise, that defines whether conflict is a destructive or productive process.

People decide to dig their heels in and stand firm for a variety of reasons. At the simplest level, people stand firm because of a conviction to an ideal or a passion for a cause. In other cases, people can be uninformed, ignorant, or unwilling to accept information that would soften a hardline position. However, embedded in all conflict is a lack of trust, empathy, or respect for the counterparty in a relationship.

To think conflict is about winning arguments is to think you can win at relationships. Nobody wins relationships and relationships don't improve without empathy, respect, and trust. The anticipation of conflict, or the avoidance thereof, is a tacit acknowledgement of a relationship that could be stronger. It is how we choose to handle conflict that determines whether relationships heal or fracture.

The key to successfully using conflict to sharpen an idea, improve an outcome, or build a stronger relationship is to understand that conflict takes many forms. The two basic types of intragroup conflict are task and relationship conflict (Jehn, 1995). Task conflict focuses on the outcome of a task and allows teams to critique results to improve performance. In fact, the highest performing teams and the military successfully maintain a focus on task conflict to improve overall team performance (Walker, 2017). Keeping the focus on processes and common goals allow task conflict to be the safest and most benign of the two because the area of concern is kept at the organizational level.

When the dialogue devolves into personal attacks, we have descended to relationship conflict. Once this happens, interpersonal issues between team members elevate into emotional judgments and heated disputes over personal differences. Relationship conflict almost always degrades team performance.

Unfortunately, the skill to navigate conflict and shepherd the process away from relationship conflict toward more productive and positive outcomes is a rare talent; even when the necessary blueprint for navigating such conflict is outlined clearly in books like *The Disconnect Principle* by Ann Latham. Those rare individuals that develop this skill and have the courage to apply it in their business dealings typically achieve success that others envy.

What makes conflict so fascinating is that it is often seen as the root cause of a problem rather than a symptom. Both conflict and the avoidance of conflict are not problems, they are the penultimate

symptoms of actual problems. And those problems always have to do with a relationship that could be in better shape. Troubled relationships may not be the ultimate business problem we need to address, but they are the embers that can fuel any problem into a full-blown crisis.

There are entire branches of psychology that are written on the internal conflict one may have within their own psyche. We will not cover that. What we will cover is the interpersonal conflict that happens within teams and the conflict that happens between groups in any organization.

At the *interpersonal level*, conflict is a marker for an underlying business problem the same way pain in your left arm is a warning sign for a heart attack. Like a serious heart condition, conflict is an acute symptom of a serious problem and needs to be addressed with urgency and caution. As obvious as this may be, many people with undiagnosed heart conditions frequently ignore warning signs for months and years while their condition worsens. Similarly, people avoid conflict even though the warning signs exist long before any crisis emerges.

We avoid difficult conversations with employees. We dread tough discussions with vendors. We delay awkward conversations with clients. All these situations are common in business and typical of relationships that could be stronger. Much like a healthy diet and exercise would stave off many heart issues, maintaining rich and respectful relationships would prevent most conflict. And while we know it is in our best interest to prevent or address conflict, there are powerful incentives to push it off for another day.

Foremost of these incentives is time. Developing and maintaining good relationships is very time consuming. Similarly, the time and effort required to change dietary routines and develop new exercise habits is an intimidating barrier that often delays any meaningful efforts to improve one's health. The cruel irony is that

investing in an improved diet and cardio routine is no guarantee that you will avoid heart issues. The same is true for relationships. You can invest in relationships and still end up in conflict.

Additionally, addressing and diffusing conflict is a risky proposition. In business, part of what makes conflict resolution so risky is that you really can't win but you can always lose. A successful outcome is an improved and more functional relationship—something that is expected to have been there in the first place. Furthermore, the process of adjudicating and resolving any conflict often reveals hard truths and stark realizations that can be overly transparent and embarrassing for everyone involved. As such, many business problems are exacerbated purely because we emotionally fear being exposed and logically avoid situations with limited upside and larger downside risks.

The problem with avoiding conflict is twofold. First, if there is a problem brewing, it is always better to address it sooner rather than later. General Colin Powell famously said, *“Bad news isn't wine. It doesn't improve with age.”* The second and more profound issue is that perceived conflict is often imagined conflict. Put simply, sometimes there just isn't any conflict of significance. As stated earlier, our imaginations never take us to a rational outcome. And once our imaginations and fears engage, the downside risk of conflict can inflate to levels far beyond reason. These two forces, working in concert, can sow the seeds for greater conflict.

When we do work up the nerve to address a situation we fear may result in conflict, we often back down and fail to be direct enough with our communication. We can't resist the temptation to soften the sharp edges of potential conflict and candy coat messages that could be perceived as negative. In our efforts to masterfully pilot our discussion through turbulent waters we often steer ourselves, and the relationship, aground. Any time we water down the discussion, ignoring the “elephant in the room”, we compromise

authenticity and raise suspicions. In these cases, we frequently increase the same tensions and fears that tempted us to back off from the position we knew we should have taken in the first place. Preempting conflict and conducting difficult discussions is not easy.

At the *organizational level*, outright conflict is less common than you might think. While individual tempers may flare and arguments may take place, it is rare to have an entire workgroup postured aggressively against another group. However, when workgroups lack trust, empathy, or respect for one another, conflict can emerge.

The reason all-out conflict within an organization is rare is because everyone, to some degree, must live together under the same roof. Additionally, from a leadership perspective, there is very little incentive to allow conflict between groups to overshadow company goals. It is a far smarter political move to let any serious conflict appear as a disagreement between individuals within those groups.

Some degree of political conflict is inevitable in all organizations. Whether it is jockeying for scarce resources (people, budget, bonuses, etc.) or plain old competition between groups, it is a guarantee that humans will be human and someone will say or do something hurtful. The key is whether the groups can come together, compromise, and collaborate effectively when needed.

The situation becomes problematic when the trends and frequency of individual instances of conflict structurally adhere to patterns across many members of a particular group. Marketing never gets their forecasts to us on time. Shipping drags their feet all day so they can work overtime. Finance never invites us to Taco Tuesday. Whatever the reason, conflict becomes an organizational issue when patterns and trends of behavior start to breed resentment between internal tribes. Although many of these “departmental” rivalries and rifts can seem as though they are shared by the entire group, most instances merely reflect ongoing interpersonal conflict between the leaders of those groups. Humans have a strange way

of adopting the views and personality of their leaders as their own. In these cases, the negative impact is usually limited to productivity and workplace harmony.

For conflict to truly exist at the organizational level, it must be structural. In these circumstances, conflict will present itself in the form of understood political rivalries and tensions that breed contempt and bad feelings. If you couple that with some tribal identity and a refusal to compromise, you have a recipe for organizational conflict. Manufacturing doesn't like Sales. The Houston office doesn't like the Denver office. The Food and Beverage Division doesn't like the Housewares Division. You get the drift.

The good news about internal company conflict is that it rarely gets to the level of existential survival. Unless a branch office is getting closed or a division is being shut down, people will still have to work together. This reason alone is why internal company conflict tends to be self-limiting in intensity.

Externally, conflict tends to happen under very specific circumstances. It is only when one party feels or is beholden to another party that the conditions for conflict are set. Otherwise, parties that are not deeply connected can decide to part and go their own ways. Put simply, it's easy to take your business elsewhere.

The situation changes when you can't take your business elsewhere. Whether there is deep technology integration, proprietary methods, or supply chain dependencies, things can get ugly and tempers can flare. The lack of alternatives can be a strong temptation for one side to feel there is no need to compromise. Similarly, the lack of recourse can provide a strong foundation for a desperate and uncompromising stance.

Add in money concerns (Large past-due balances, slow payment terms, contested invoices, etc.) and the situation becomes explosive. The rationale is that money establishes the method to measure if

someone has “won” a business relationship. It is impossible to win at interpersonal relationships, but once we add in money, we have a construct to measure the success of any negotiation. And while most negotiations are not full-blown conflicts, many businesspeople are so unskilled at negotiation that they feel it is appropriate to take hardline positions that show little respect for their business partner.

Once again, any kind of conflict is still a symptom of a larger set of issues.



Everyone that works with Diana knows the one name that can send her into an emotional tirade. It’s the name of her former partner... Donna!

Diana did not start in business alone. In the beginning, it was Diana and Donna. A power-duo of driven young executives with big ideas and even bigger dreams. The two became friends in graduate school and quickly formed a bond with one another. They collaborated on projects and shared similar visions for environmental best-practices that businesses could profitably implement. At the time, most people thought that profit and environmentalism were mutually exclusive goals. The tandem of Diana and Donna knew better.

The early years were fun, but they didn’t last. In time, the alignment between the two faded and the distance between the pair grew. Their alignment on the mission and vision of the organization was never the source of their fracture, it had more to do with style. Diana and Donna’s leadership styles were very different.

Diana is an inclusive and supportive leader. She does not see others as threats to her authority and therefore empowers everyone to learn and grow with her. Donna saw things differently. Donna’s

style was controlling and authoritative. Her skills were useful when they were managing a project with tight budgets and deadlines, but they were caustic for growing a team and a company. As time passed, Diana was seen as the visionary leader of the organization while Donna was viewed much less favorably by the staff and clients. Donna had a role to play in the organization, but it was not the leadership role she wanted... or thought she deserved as a co-founder.

Have you experienced any stylistic clashes?

The result was a split. A business divorce. These can be painful and costly affairs. This case was no different. With sufficient confidence in herself and the comfort Dean's successful career afforded, Diana chose to exit the company with terms that favored Donna greatly but allowed her the freedom to end the process quickly and start again on her own. Many saw this as a loss for Diana and victory for Donna. Diana knew better.

Ten years later, Diana has a successful business that is well-respected in the community. Diana's business has grown steadily, while Donna's business is no bigger than the day Diana left. And while Donna's business has stumbled along working one project at a time, she maintains a small and highly competent staff. Even though these facts could give Diana great comfort in her decision, she is still raw from the concessions she made and the indignation she endured.

However, Diana does realize that Donna held her back. She also acknowledges that she never would have established the guiding principles of her "True North" story if it were not for the stark contrast between her and Donna's leadership style. Even with all these affirmations, thinking about those days still hurts.

Can you think of a bad situation that eventually turned into a blessing?

With more “food on her plate” than her company can eat, Diana knows she needs to start making some different decisions. She either needs to turn away some business, delay some engagements, or seek outside help to keep her team from being overwhelmed.

Diana considers engaging Donna to help with her backlog of work. Donna’s project management expertise could be a huge help on her biggest and most complex project. After much pondering, Diana decides that would be a bad idea. Donna’s uncompromising style might bring a level of toxicity and conflict into an important client relationship.

Instead, Diana opts to keep her distance from Donna and the stress that goes with all the baggage from their divorce. Her plan is to contact three of the clients that are looking to start new projects with her in the coming weeks and discuss alternatives. One option would be to refer those clients to Donna’s firm. And while the mere thought of “giving” projects to Donna noticeably raises Diana’s stress level, having her firm implode under the pressure of too much work is an outcome that would be more crushing.

Diana knows that this approach would provide time to retrench with her team and oversee the changes that would allow them to address the turnover crisis and work more efficiently. It is the right decision, but a bitter pill to swallow. Diana agonizes over this decision and dreads the phone calls she knows are necessary.

That evening Diana plays out the phone calls in her head. Her imagination is running wild, and her thoughts are filled with worst-case scenarios:

- What will she say to Donna?
- How will her clients react?
- Will this hurt the reputation of the firm she has poured her heart and soul into?
- Will Donna poison important client relationships she has been fostering for years?
- Will Donna be smug about this and make it feel like yet another defeat?

The morning arrives and all the calls are made. After it is all said and done, it is not as painful as Diana had imagined it would be. Two of her three clients agree to delay their projects for a full quarter. One client is very understanding and respects the value of Diana and her firm. They are willing to wait for the “best-in-class” service Diana’s firm has a reputation for delivering. Much to her surprise, a second client was already planning on calling her about delaying the start of their engagement as they were behind schedule with some of their internal planning.

The third client is interested in an introduction to Donna and her firm. They are on a tight timeline for their capital project and delays would be very costly. Diana’s explanation of being too busy was frustrating to them, but they were not as upset as she would have predicted. They were disappointed about a misleading sales experience, but they were very appreciative of the up-front acknowledgment of limitations that could threaten their project timeline.

The dreaded conversation with Donna was not as bad as expected. Although Donna was indeed a bit smug at times, it was clear she could use the business. Before Donna could ask, Diana made it clear that she was not looking for a finder’s fee or commission for this referral. There were no strings attached. No conflict. No Drama.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jim Vaselopulos is a C-level business advisor and executive coach with a proven record as a leader, strategist, rainmaker, and expert in new business development. With his principled leadership, visionary approach, and effective execution, Jim has successfully established new companies and transformed underperforming organizations. As the founder of Rafti Advisors, Jim assists early-stage businesses in launching successfully, growth-stage enterprises in accelerating their progress, and established organizations in navigating complex challenges and strategic shifts.

He teaches sales and professional development and frequently speaks on the subjects of leadership and innovation. Jim is also the co-host of The Leadership Podcast and volunteers regularly with business incubators and veterans groups. He graduated from the University of Illinois with a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering and earned his MBA at Marquette University. Jim is a dedicated husband and father of two wonderful children with his wife, Dana.

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