

From Combat to Cooperation: What War Taught a Former Army Colonel About Leading Through Division

Chris Kolenda draws on battlefield lessons so today's leaders transform polarization into collaboration

MILWAUKEE, WI, UNITED STATES, November 5, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- As divisions deepen across workplaces, communities, and politics, retired U.S. Army Colonel [Chris Kolenda](#), Ph.D., says the lessons that helped end violence in Afghanistan can help leaders today turn discord into cooperation.



Chris Kolenda

"Disagreement is inevitable. [Conflict is voluntary](#)," Kolenda says. "In every setting, from war zones to boardrooms, the question isn't whether people will disagree. It's how leaders respond when they do."

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Research suggests that miscommunication costs the average company 1 day/week—that's 10 weeks/year—for each employee—and that managers spend over a quarter of their time resolving disputes. Kolenda argues that reframing disagreement as a source of insight, not threat, can reclaim that lost energy and drive innovation.

Kolenda's understanding of conflict was forged during some of the most volatile years of the Afghanistan War. Leading U.S. paratroopers in an area plagued by insurgent attacks, he found that conventional military strategies only hardened divisions. His team shifted its approach, seeking common ground with people and former enemies rather than trying to overpower them.

That decision produced a breakthrough: a big insurgent faction switched sides, the only known

example of such success during the 20-year conflict. Kolenda's work led him to become the Secretary of Defense's personal representative in early negotiations with the Taliban, and later, to talks so constructive that the Taliban issued a public letter in 2018 to the American people calling for peace talks.

Today, Kolenda applies those same insights to leadership challenges in business and government. He works with CEOs and senior executives to build alignment, trust, and cooperation amid deepening polarization.

According to Kolenda, most organizational conflict stems from three root causes:

Objectives – people disagree about what they're trying to achieve.

Ways to get there – they clash over methods and priorities.

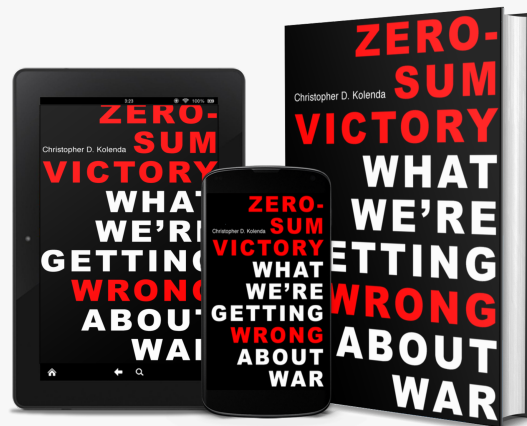
Recognition – they seek validation for their contributions.

"You have to address them in that order," he explains. "If people aren't aligned on objectives, debates about methods are futile. And if people don't feel seen and valued, even shared success can breed resentment."

"In Afghanistan, we discovered that the voices we least wanted to hear were the ones we most needed to understand," Kolenda says. "Leaders who dare to listen to disagreement don't just reduce conflict, they unlock cooperation."

About Chris Kolenda

Chris Kolenda, Ph.D., Colonel (U.S. Army, Ret.), is a leadership expert, author, and trusted advisor to CEOs, Cabinet officials, and senior executives. A West Point graduate and internationally recognized combat leader, he became the first American to both fight the Taliban in combat and



Zero-Sum Victory



Chris K and CHris D

later negotiate successfully with them. His clients measure their results in the tens of millions of dollars, using principles that help leaders transform conflict into cooperation. Kolenda is the author of Zero-Sum Victory: What We're Getting Wrong About War and Leadership: The Warrior's Art.

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