



Dealing Creatively with

CONFLICT

Conflict or disagreement is normal, natural and inevitable in everyday life. The world would be boring if everyone agreed with each other all the time. Conflict, though, can be harmful. When tempers flare, conflict escalates and can be destructive. However, when handled skillfully, it can be helpful by providing all parties involved with opportunities for growth.

Interpersonal conflict can range from mild to severe and, as with any type of conflict, is best dealt with before the disagreement intensifies.

The attitudes toward the situation, rather than the point of a disagreement, determine whether a conflict is functional or destructive. For instance, an argument about who is to do the supper dishes is potentially as destructive as one about family finances, depending on the attitudes of those involved. Learning to recognize the forces at work in a conflict is the key to turning a destructive conflict into a functional, mutually helpful discussion. It is important to learn the differences be-

tween a destructive conflict and a helpful, productive conflict.

One critical difference is that in a positive, helpful conflict each person genuinely wants to solve the problem. Often, people claim a desire to solve a problem when in fact what they really want is to force their opinions on others. When a person in a conflict feels "right" and "good" and views the other person as "wrong" and, therefore "bad," the conflict can become a battle of wills where both sides are firmly entrenched in their opinion, unwilling to give an inch. If both parties are intent on forcing the other to change, resolution of the conflict isn't likely.

The basic assumptions held about conflict also play a critical role in determining whether a given conflict will be helpful or destructive. Several specific beliefs are fundamental to solving conflict in a mutually beneficial way.



Beliefs That Help Resolve Conflict

- **There is a mutually acceptable solution to the problem.** A helpful approach involves people working together and cooperating to find solutions on which both parties can agree. Obviously, there are situations when everyone can't win, and occasionally compromise is simply not an option. Most of the time, however, it is possible for both parties to agree on a solution.
- **Cooperation is more effective than competition.** An "I win, you lose" attitude forces the other person into the role of an opponent. Competition, not cooperation, dominates the conflict and hinders the likelihood of a mutually acceptable solution. Coercion and power plays do not enhance the quality of a relationship, and often backfire on the person using them. Issuing ultimatums

usually increases resentment, escalates the present conflict, and creates new conflicts. Both parties have rights and needs. A person in a functional, beneficial conflict recognizes that the other party also has legitimate rights and needs. "I wonder what things are like from the other person's point of view?" is a helpful question to consider.

- **Differences of opinion are helpful.** Our forefathers built this country on the freedom to express individual opinions. Refusing to consider the opinions of others does not make conflict resolution any easier. Be open to the ideas and opinions of others, not only to those you share, but also to those quite different from your own. The other person might have more information than you, and as a result, an opinion slightly different from your own.

- **Trusting those involved in the conflict is important.** Obviously, compromise is difficult when one person doesn't trust the other. It's hard to give up something when you don't feel the other person will uphold her end of the agreement. Compromise is a basic component of conflict management. Without compromise, finding mutually acceptable solutions is difficult. In order to compromise, you need trust.

Once you establish a positive attitude toward resolving a conflict, it's time to start the resolution process. As with anything else, a conflict is best tackled logically and systematically. People handle conflicts in one of four ways. When conflict occurs, we may reduce it, avoid it, maintain it at the current level, or escalate it. For instance, when an individual refuses to talk about something, she probably has chosen to avoid the conflict.

All these options are available during any conflict. A person unhappy in her job could resign (avoiding and eventually reducing the conflict), confront her boss (escalating and then possibly reducing the conflict), or continue working (maintaining and avoiding the conflict). When involved in a conflict, know exactly what your goals are and try to determine the goals of the other person as well. If the goals seem compatible, begin negotiating by trying to find some point of agreement no matter how small or vague.

Conversational Strategies for Dealing with Conflict

Asking questions is critical to resolving conflict successfully. The best questions are those that are open-ended to encourage answers of more than one or two words. Open-ended questions are not yes or no questions; instead, they ask for elaboration and explanation. For example, you might say, "What do you think is the best way to handle this?" instead of "Do you think this is the best way to handle this?"

Don't put the other person on the spot by immediately asking difficult questions. Lead up to the hard questions by first asking questions easily discussed by both parties.

When the other person voices an opinion different from your own, before you voice disagreement, ask the other person why she feels the way she does.

Often when a problem arises, both parties misinterpret what the other is saying and, therefore, cannot find a solution. Be an active listener. Tell the other person what you thought she meant. If your spouse tells you that he doesn't want you playing bridge tonight, as an active listener you might say, "You don't like me having fun without you?" only to find that your spouse just doesn't want to be alone. Or maybe, after telling a friend that you look forward to getting together with her in the future, she remarks that you might not even know each other then. Your feelings are hurt because you think your friend doesn't want to keep up the friendship. You say, "Does that mean you don't want to see me?" The friend replies "No, that's just my way of saying that I want us to spend more time together." By using active listening, both parties understand what the other really means, which often is not immediately apparent.

When you have negative criticism to deliver, there usually is a way to turn the criticism into a constructive, positive statement. Instead of saying, "You left your shirt in the bathroom again. This must be the 11th time this week I've talked to you about this," try something more positive, like, "Thanks for putting your socks in the hamper. Little things you do like that really help me a lot. Tell me what you want for dinner and it's yours." Instead of fussing and nagging about a problem behavior, get results by reinforcing good behavior. One music teacher tactfully told an off-key student, "Not bad, and if you would sing a note higher, it would be great!"

Many magazines and pamphlets promote the popular belief that it is best in a relationship to tell each other

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everything; the truth will set you free! Actually, there is a point at which too much self disclosure can make a conflict worse. The trick is deciding how much is enough. You should not lie or deceive the other person, but some things are better left unsaid. The other person doesn't need to know all of your deep dark secrets in order to solve the problem at hand.

Eight Steps for Solving Conflict

1. Be as calm as possible. When you are genuinely calm, you can think more clearly. Your intuition is keener. Your calmness also will have a soothing, positive effect on those around you. When emotions are running high, consider postponing the confrontation temporarily. Plead the need to cool off and think over the situation.

2. Define your needs. Exactly what do you expect to accomplish? Do you think fundamental needs for your happiness are being ignored? Are your desires realistic, or are you expecting more than you are willing to give yourself? Decide specifically what you need.

3. Communicate your needs. Make sure the other person in the conflict understands your position on the issue in question. Tell her what you need. Use "I" statements when explaining your wants and needs. Avoid accusatory "you" statements, saying instead "I would like..." or "I feel..." This way the other person will be less likely to feel threatened.

4. Listen. Make sure you understand the other person's position on the issue in question. Listen while she relates to you her own wants and needs. Don't argue mentally when you should be listening. Give your full attention. Don't make any assumptions about what the other person is feeling. Ask questions. Restate what you hear in your own words to make sure you understand.

5. Brainstorm. Once everyone clearly understands each other's needs, work together to generate as many solutions as possible. Keep in mind that the final solution should benefit everyone involved. Often, the brainstorming process brings to the surface underlying misconceptions about the problem. Listen carefully to make sure that proposed solutions consider the needs of both persons. If a particular need is being ignored, it's possible that one party doesn't understand it or is not fully aware the need

exists. Allow plenty of time for brainstorming. At this point, the purpose is to think of as many solutions as possible. Don't criticize any ideas. Even the wildest ideas can be helpful in the long run. Keep a positive, enthusiastic atmosphere; laughing and having a good time while generating solutions helps to lessen some of the negative feelings brought on by the conflict. Keep the atmosphere positive by complimenting each other's suggested solutions. When you run out of new ideas, try to build on those already suggested.

6. Evaluate alternatives. After discarding those solutions obviously not mutually acceptable, look at the remaining options. Determine which ones best suit everyone's clearly stated wants and needs. At this point, it may be necessary to compromise in order to find the best solution. Sometimes a combination of several alternatives works best for both parties.

7. Try your solution. Once both parties have found an agreeable solution, put it to the test. Uphold your end of the agreement. Thinking from the start that the solution will not work may ensure its failure. Avoid that mistake! Keep a positive, optimistic attitude.

8. Re-evaluate. After you've had a chance to try out your solution, get together again a week or two later to discuss how the solution is working. It might be necessary to reform your solution to better meet needs neglected by the original agreement. You may even find it necessary to alter your agreement on a regular basis to meet changing needs.

Suggestions for Solving Conflicts Productively

- Choose a good time and place to resolve a conflict. Don't start a discussion when the other person is obviously angry or distracted. Sometimes just setting up a future time and place to talk about the problem encourages calmer and more rational, productive attitudes.
- Don't bring up issues unrelated to the present conflict. A discussion on the family budget is not the proper time to air grievances about an in-law's recent visit. Functional problem-solvers stick to one problem at a time.
- Keep in mind the problem's implications for the future. Don't win a battle and lose a relationship. Getting your own way about how to spend extra money probably wouldn't be worth a divorce or the dissolving of a partnership.



- When you get stuck and can't seem to agree on anything, stop for a minute and talk about other things you have in common. Exploring common ground together reminds each party that you can agree on something and can break down any stubbornness getting in the way of a solution.
- Avoid becoming defensive. Often when conflict develops, one person may feel personally attacked and may become defensive. Defensive behaviors waste energy and usually make the problem worse. You may notice that your face is starting to get hot, your body is tightening up, you've broken out in a nervous sweat, or you've started to avoid eye contact. You also may notice that you have stopped listening, are playing helpless, are concentrating on justifying your actions, or are thinking of ways to retaliate. When you find yourself engaging in these types of defensive behaviors, it means that you've stopped working toward finding a solution to the problem. When you start feeling defensive, concentrate on calming down and listening.
- Concentrate on the present. Recalling old fights or developing strategies to use in the future can distract you from the present conflict. If you dredge up old fights from the past, you've stopped trying to solve the present problem.
- If you feel attacked, try not to take the attack personally. Perhaps the other person has had a bad day and is just taking it out on you. Remind yourself that you are a good person, competent, and capable of withstanding this attack without feeling threatened or angry. At the very least, when attacked, be gentle. Say or do something genuinely helpful for the other person and for yourself.
- Remember, no one is perfect. Try to accept yourself—as well as the other person—imperfections and all. Don't waste energy indulging in unnecessary worries about yourself. If you make a mistake, learn from it and keep on going. You can do better the next time. Allow others the same privilege.
- Keep a sense of humor. Don't make fun of the other person, but do laugh at yourself and at the situation. Avoid being over-serious; be a little lighthearted. Humor is a wonderful stress reducer!

Handling Criticism and Manipulation

- When you are criticized, ask for details. If someone claims that you embarrassed her, ask when, how, and why she felt embarrassed.
- Agree with the person criticizing you. What can you agree with? You can always agree with the truth. Even if the accusation isn't true, you can always agree that the individual is entitled to her opinion. If someone complains that you always are late, you might admit that you were

late today, while pointing out that you've been on time every other day.

- Calmly and repeatedly say no to unreasonable requests. Conflicts often arise when an individual is trying to persuade another person to do something she doesn't want to do. To avoid being manipulated in this manner, agree as much as you can with the individual while repeating that you don't want to do what she is requesting. For example, when a coworker applies pressure to get you to "volunteer" to serve on her committee, agree that it sounds like a wonderful opportunity but unfortunately you are unable to participate. When your co-worker says you are unreasonable, calmly concede that you might be unreasonable, but nonetheless you still are unable to serve. Insist repeatedly that you are unable to serve until the manipulator finally recognizes that you are sincere and not about to be bullied into doing something you don't want to do.

Leadership Strategies for Dealing with Conflict

There are many good ways to manage conflict. Effective leaders know and use a variety of these techniques, choosing the method to fit the situation. Below are six common strategies. Use these strategies alone, in sequence, or in combination. Most good managers use them all at one time or another.

- **Avoid involvement in the conflict.** This technique works well when the conflict is trivial, when it will resolve itself, or when the parties involved are capable of working out their differences without help. This method has the benefits of increasing the conflicting parties' feelings of responsibility and their skill in resolving conflict. It carries the risk, though, of the conflict not being resolved quickly or perhaps mushrooming into a much larger issue requiring more time and skill to resolve.
- **Give it back to those involved.** This alternative differs slightly from avoidance in that the manager listens to a discussion of the issue by those involved and then requests that the parties come up with a solution of their own, perhaps within a certain time frame. When using this method the leader takes some control over the conflict, yet gives the conflicting parties an opportunity to test and improve their own conflict management skills. The risks involved in this method, as with avoidance, are that the parties may not be able to resolve the issue, that resolution will be excessively time consuming, or that the conflict may become even more complex and difficult to solve.
- **Impose one's own solution.** In this alternative, the leader listens to the conflicting parties, makes a unilateral decision about what the solution will be, announces the decision to those involved, and makes sure they understand the decision. This is an effective strategy when time is short, when the manager believes the two parties are not

competent to resolve the issue without help, or when the manager knows the correct solution.

A competent leader openly admits that she already has chosen a solution. The risks of this approach are fairly obvious. In the long run, this method can create highly frustrated and dependent group members or employees. Also, there are few managers who always know more than the people involved about how to resolve an issue. The major benefit of this conflict management strategy is that the manager usually will get a short-range solution she judges to be the best choice.

- **Compromise.** Compromising means all parties discuss the issue and then accept the minimum they can live with to stop the conflict. The primary goal is to stop the conflict quickly rather than thoroughly working out the basic issue. The risk is that compromising may stop this conflict situation, but leave the door open for similar or even larger manifestations of the unresolved issues.

- **Collaborate.** To collaborate, those in conflict state their positions, their goals, and their needs in the conflict situation, and then listen while other parties do the same. They then attempt to work through the conflict to a mutually satisfactory outcome. In collaboration, everyone involved attempts to understand the root cause and the basic issue of the problem. When the parties have clarified the problem and understand the perspectives and goals of all involved, those who are in conflict work together to find an acceptable long-range resolution. The solution they come up with may be better than that initially proposed by any of the conflicting parties.

Collaboration can be a time-consuming process, and it requires that the parties involved be willing to work together. The benefit of collaboration is that the resolution is likely to be a good and long-lasting one which addresses the root cause of the disagreement. Also, when all parties involved have decided upon a solution, they are more likely to commit themselves to actualizing that solution. This process of creative problem solving can boost group morale, improve interpersonal relationships, and build the participants' conflict resolution skills

- **Refer to a problem-solving group.** Asking an appropriate group to resolve an issue or recommend a solution is a time-honored method of handling a conflict. Refer conflicts in formal decision-making groups to the appropriate

committees. For example, refer a conflict over finances to the budget committee; a conflict between two group members to the entire group.

If an appropriate problem-solving group does not exist, the leader may put together a time-limited group to deal with the issue at hand. The leader may or may not elect to be a member of this group.

This method of conflict resolution can be time consuming. Referring to a problem-solving group has the advantage of engaging the expertise and fresh perspective of relative "outsiders" in solving a conflict.

Third Party Intervention

Here are some guidelines to keep in mind when you are trying to help two other parties solve a difference of opinion.

- Be descriptive rather than judgmental. Instead of pinning labels such as "uncooperative" on people, describe behaviors by saying things like "she refused to help five times."

- Encourage parties to be specific. Get people to describe specific incidents rather than general feelings. Instead of saying, "I'm not sure people will like it," encourage participants to be specific, saying, "John and Sue won't like it, because they opposed this before."

- Concentrate on what can be changed. If you focus on issues that for now can't be changed, you'll waste your energy and encourage needless frustration.

- Encourage people to speak for themselves. Ask for individual feelings and comments on a situation.

- Call on quiet people in a non-threatening way. Saying, "Dr. Edwards, you seem interested, but I'm not sure how you feel about the issue," is a good way to get a response from someone who is not actively voicing an opinion.

Unresolved Conflict

At times, despite every effort by one or both parties, a conflict can remain unresolved. If one party is irrational or deeply angry, conflict resolution may not be possible until the irrational thinking is lessened or the anger is defused. In such cases, professional counseling may be in order.

Sometimes couples believe they must resolve each and every conflict that arises in their relationship. Keep in mind that not all interpersonal conflicts need to be solved. Some disagreements are relatively unimportant and perhaps are best overlooked or treated lightly. When an issue has been dealt with openly and still remains unresolved, maybe that's OK. Accepting and respecting



another person's opinion is a mark of maturity. "Agreeing to disagree" is an extremely valuable strategy in building strong interpersonal relationships.

When conflict surrounding a critical issue cannot be resolved, accepting that reality is important. It may mean the break-up of a relationship or finding a new job. Continuing unresolved conflict on a major scale can be destructive. Only you can decide whether it's best to withdraw and move on.

Conflict is part of being alive. We can't change that. We can, however, change the way we respond to conflict. If we perceive it positively and handle it skillfully, conflict can be a healthy force in our lives.

Conflict is a major motivator of change and innovation. It is a mirror in which we see how well we perform under pressure, a mirror in which we see our strengths and shortcomings both as individuals and as a society. Conflict is an opportunity for learning and for growing.

To what extent can we reduce unnecessary conflict? Will the conflict situations we face turn out to be helpful or destructive? The choices, to a large degree, are up to us.

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For More Information

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