



Resolving Conflict

When one person's action or position interferes with another's, interpersonal conflict can occur. Conflict is defined here simply as a disagreement or opposing position on an issue.

Conflicts arise over goals and ways to reach goals, our expectations for each other, and misunderstandings of all kinds. They are inevitable. Anyone in a relationship with another person faces conflict occasionally. In fact, conflict can arise within minutes or hours of meeting another person.

Is Conflict Bad?

The conflict-free relationship is not a healthy one. Lack of conflict only indicates that one person is being subdued or that the relationship is very distant and cold.

Unfortunately, many of us were taught that conflict is bad and should be avoided at all costs. Conflict is blamed for divorce, fights between neighbors, disturbances at the work place, and even violence.

It would be more accurate to say that the failure to handle conflicts in a constructive way is one of the destroyers of relationships. Denying conflict may bring about divorce, fights, or disturbances more quickly than open conflict.

The Promise of Resolution

When conflict is dealt with constructively, the process strengthens relationships. This is because resolving a conflict teaches people a great deal more about each other. During conflict a lot of information comes out and later each person may think or say, "I didn't know that about you."

Constructive conflict also can increase closeness in a relationship. Even a simple agreement to disagree allows two people to support each other's individuality.

Handling conflict effectively builds confidence and encourages a willingness to continue to take risks in a relationship. It also gives a person the ability to handle the stress of conflict.

Understanding Another Position

The distorted view of another's motivation, behavior, and position is probably the greatest block to handling conflict constructively. Some of the more common distortions can be found in almost all conflicting positions between people, groups, and nations. Three of these distortions are:

1. *Mirror image.* Each person thinks he or she is an innocent victim representing truth and justice. Each may see the other person as "the enemy." Each perceives himself or herself as totally right; the other is totally wrong. The position is "Everything I do is right; everything you do is wrong."
2. *Tunnel vision.* Each person can see clearly the underhanded, slanted, or false and vicious acts of others while being totally blind to the same behavior in himself or herself. This position is described as "What is okay for me to do is not acceptable for you to do." This distortion allows a double standard, even when people are aware of the unfair actions on both sides.
3. *Polarized thinking.* This kind of thinking happens when one or both parties have an oversimplified view of the conflict.

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A value judgement is involved, with one side seen as good and the other side seen as bad.

If people allow these distortions to control the way they handle conflict, the issue probably will remain unresolved. The focus is on blaming the other and justifying yourself, rather than focusing on the issue at hand. The other person almost instinctively will become defensive in an attempt to justify his or her own position. The result is likely to be hostility rather than resolution. Each person in the relationship probably will see the other as overly emotional and unreasonable. The relationship ends up with more conflict rather than less.

Avoiding the Trap

Most people overlook the fact that each person in a conflict usually has mixed feelings. While there are hostile feelings and each wishes the other would give in, usually there is also some affection and a wish for agreement.

The three distortions mentioned above keep people from noticing the positive feelings, setting the trap for failure. Try to avoid the defensive position and the feeling that the other person is the irrational enemy. In addition, managing conflict can be more successful if you try to:

- *Avoid creating conflict over unimportant matters.* If you find yourself frequently in conflict over trivial matters, you may need to seek help to find out what is underneath the hostility.
- *Keep conflicts current.* Old conflicts simply clutter up your relationships like old junk clutters a basement or attic.
- *Review your interpersonal skills periodically.* It is almost impossible to resolve conflict without the ability to listen well, express your feelings honestly, and avoid judging the other person.

Making Decisions

Once hostile and distorted judgements have been eliminated, sit down in a rational atmosphere and go through the decision-making process. If the process outlined seems shallow and unrealistic, there may be a need to go back to an earlier stage to prepare for making decisions together.

Processing Conflict

1. Acknowledge conflict to each other. The sooner one person can say, "Look, we really disagree about this," the sooner the conflict can be handled.
2. Both must agree on a time to discuss the matter. No discussion or argument should proceed unless both agree that they want to face the issue now. If one person wants to

delay the discussion, they should try to set a specific time and place to handle the conflict.

3. Each person should speak only for oneself and describe the conflict from one side. While one person is speaking, the other person should listen carefully. This is not the time to answer, make wild gestures, or hostile sounds. Try to be sure that everything related to the conflict is said and all feelings are expressed.

4. Next, each person in turn tries to describe his or her perception of the other person's position and feelings. You might begin with expressions like, "As I see it, you think (feel)..." The discussion needs to stay at this point until each person agrees that the other has understood his or her position. Even if the discussion is delayed or if the participants have to get professional help, there is no point in going on until both agree that the other has understood.

Remember, this is not the time for rebuttals, name-calling, or debate. Each person is only stating the other person's position until each has agreed that the other understands. There is no possible way to resolve a conflict if every point of feeling and fact has to be debated.

5. After each person is satisfied that the other understands, list all options that come to mind. What can be done to resolve the conflict? Both parties should put on the list what they would like to happen, what each is willing to do, and what each wishes the other to do.

6. Study and revise both lists until both parties find something they can agree to try. There may be several items that can be fit together into one procedure that both will agree to try. A sincere willingness to compromise is necessary at this stage.

7. Agree on a time to come back together again to discuss how well the solution fits the persons involved. Then there can be revisions and changes as both agree.

Again, do not make this procedure a review or point by point debate. Feelings expressed are to be accepted as facts—they are the way a person feels. Those feelings are neither right nor wrong; they need no rebuttal. There is no need to place blame or fault. Try to stick to the point.

Participants may never agree on many of the original points of the issue being discussed. The only agreement necessary is on the mutual action to be taken.

After two people have resolved a few conflicts successfully, they will be able to follow different sequences of the suggested process, use different approaches other than this process, and will not necessarily need to write down all the options every time a conflict arises.

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