

Conflict

What is Conflict?

Conflict generally occurs when people come into opposition. This may begin with disagreements or when differences are emphasized. Misunderstandings and stubbornness often come into play. Unchecked, conflict can trigger stress, frustration, hostility, withdrawal, blaming, fear, mistrust, disappointment, defensiveness, resentment and even retaliation.

When managed productively, conflict can lead to stronger working relationships, personal growth, understanding and increased respect. Overall feeling states and sense of wellbeing may improve as well (Who really enjoys being angry all of the time?).

What Makes Conflict Worse?

- In times of conflict, it may not be helpful to emphasize differences which may fuel further animosity. Better to identify common ground.
- Avoidance does not make conflict go away – it only tends to push it underground and people don't feel any better. Simply dismissing others and thinking you need to take care of everything on your own may only breed further resentment. However, don't continue pursuing a situation if you feel unsafe.
- Don't criticize, insult, blame or call people names. Threatening or yelling tends to be perceived as aggressive and may lead to further hostility. Bringing up past situations or injustices may only add fuel to conflict. Trying to force others to give you what you want tends to increase frustration and breeds resentment.
- Sometimes we think that if we just “be nice” others will feel obligated to be nice in return. But who really likes to feel they “owe” someone being nice in return?
- Manipulating or tricking others may create even more difficulties and diminish trust once someone catches on.
- Don't take things personally or hold grudges as this may only increase your own stress level and solve nothing.

Conflict Management Tips

- Prepare for conflict. Choose an appropriate time and place for further conversation. Deal with emotions. Recognize that you are entitled to your feelings, but yet remember you choose how you want to convey them. Develop an anger management plan. Breathe. Relax.
- Approach the other person. Create safety in responding to conflict. Create ground rules for safety.
- Identify your positive intent. Let others know what positive outcome you would like in the situation – something that's mutually beneficial to each other. (“I'd like us to get along as well as possible.” “I'd like for us to figure out how to solve this problem together.”)

- Utilize assertive communication. Speak from your own experience. Raise issues using “I” statements. (Resist the temptation to blame or label the other person.) Be mindful of your words, tone of voice and body language.
- Apologize if things seem to get out of hand. (“I’m sorry we argued.”)
- Seek to understand. Ask how others see the situation and how they feel about it. Listen. Don’t disagree or argue – remember understanding does not equal agreement. Convey your understanding (“It seems like you want ...”)
- Focus on the problem NOT the person. Note behaviors or situations you’d like to have been different that are possible (vs. have the person change magically into another person). Focus on the current situation (not past ones). Be specific. Suggest positive solutions.
- Begin to work toward solutions by brainstorming (begin to problem solve). Make statements such as “What do you think would be helpful in this situation?” “How can I be helpful to you?” Weigh pros and cons, agree to an approach, try it out, and come back together to review how it’s worked out at a later time.
- Seek assistance when necessary. “Hey, maybe we could get our supervisor to help us work things out.” Mediation by a third party can be very helpful.

Summary

Some amount of conflict may always creep into our lives. However, we can reduce the potential negative impact of conflict by responding to it differently. Utilize the tools provided here, practice, and continue moving through conflict, rather than getting stuck in it! You can do this!

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