

Managing Conflict In Everyday Life

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This publication describes the differences between conflict and disagreement and provides procedures for successful resolution.

Wherever human interactions exist, there is a potential for conflicts to arise. Because we are all individuals, with differing personalities, needs, experiences, values, and perceptions, we are unlikely to see things the same all of the time. Everything we experience is filtered through those factors within each of our lives. While we may disagree with another person, a conflict is a more serious form of disagreement. Conflict can lead to either breakdown in the relationship, the family, friendship, or work environment. Or it can lead to creative solutions and improved relationships.

To help clarify each portion of this guide, scenarios are included to humanize the principles being discussed.

How Do People Respond to Conflict?

In the scenario that follows, some ineffective ways that people tend to respond are shown in bold print.

- *Four co-workers—Betty, Jose, Irene, and Dave—work in close proximity at their plant. Their work is often intense and rushed, and tempers flare. Conflict and hard feelings are usually just under the surface with this group. Management has told them to “just work it out.” Betty is the team leader, and she is a perfectionist. They have a big order coming in, and Betty is hot-tempered under stress. She has spent most of today scolding the others about their work. Though the others are trying very hard to do good work and meet the requirements, Betty is harsh and directive. Staff members don’t mind being corrected but wish Betty could do it pleasantly. **Some individuals get angry, call names, or become aggressive in other ways.***
- *Jose becomes very nervous when Betty gets upset, and is afraid he might lose his job. Though Betty has no intention of firing him, he is losing sleep over it. He doesn’t say anything to anyone about his worries and just tries to stay out of Betty’s way. **Some individuals withdraw and try to avoid any conflict. This can***

lead to unsolved issues because they don’t want to talk about it.

- *Irene is a quieter individual, and turns her emotions inward. Betty approaches her about a tool that needs to be sharpened, and she doesn’t say it nicely. Irene pretends nothing is wrong, but later is huffy and short with other workers. This is confusing to the others as they think she is mad at them. **Some individuals get upset but keep it inside. They may give the other(s) a cold shoulder or speak only abruptly. Others may know they are upset but don’t always know why. Some may give in and be submissive, but at the same time make it fairly clear that they don’t agree.***
- *Dave is laid back and funny, but a little lazy. The stress at work does not seem to bother him, and he makes jokes about everything. During one of Betty’s scolding sessions, Dave makes faces at the others behind her back. When management takes him aside to ask if everything is okay, Dave says, “Yeah, sure. No problem.” **Some will deny that any conflict exists and insist that everything is okay.***

Unfortunately these methods don’t work very well. They tend to prolong the conflict and not solve any problems.

Where Do We Find Conflict?

In any situation where decisions are carried out, choices made, and two or more people involved, conflicts can arise. It is a normal part of life, not anything unusual or strange. Differences in opinion about how things should be done don’t have to be destructive. Creative problem solving can lead to a stronger, more satisfying situation. Failure to work through the differences and reach an agreeable solution can lead to dissension, dissatisfaction, or failure.

Why Does Conflict Occur?

Julianna and Alana are sisters, whose parents were killed in a car accident five years ago. Julianna, twelve years older than her sister, was a young adult at the time and took Alana into her home. Alana is a teenager now. Conflict has been building for the last two years, and is about to come to a head

over curfews, dating, and more. Alana frequently reminds Julianna that she's not her mother, and Julianna is frustrated about how to help Alana be more responsible and safe.

Lack of communication is a common problem that can lead to large levels of conflict. Sometimes we make assumptions about what the other person thinks or feels, without actually talking to them about it. When we make assumptions, the conclusions we reach can be much more negative than actual fact. Because of her worries and their lack of communication, Julianna may be assuming the worst. Alana may be more responsible than her sister realizes. It would also be helpful if Alana would communicate her experiences rather than lashing out at her older sister.

Lack of leadership occurs in many situations, whether in the family or on the job. Questioning who's in charge is not unusual, and may occur when someone fails to take the leadership role to which he or she has been assigned. Effective leadership involves positive interactions with others, not just giving out orders, and not taking a back seat when rules need to be enforced. Because Julianna was young when she took on the role of mother to her sister, she may not have realized the importance of letting Alana know that she was in charge.

Lack of role division. If two people see each other's roles differently, expectations can lead to high levels of conflict. Though Alana appears to be resisting Julianna's rules, at the same time she can feel at loose ends because she needs adult approval and supervision.

Value conflicts. Sometimes our inner belief systems vary so much from another person's that it is difficult to reach a conclusion satisfactory to both. It is like jumping on a horse and riding off in all directions. We may not be able to follow each person's most valued concepts. An inner belief system is sometimes called a paradigm. Paradigm shifts are extremely difficult and create much inner conflict. This may or may not apply to the sisters in the scenario.

Resistance to change. Without a catalyst, our comfort level is often at the "leave things as they are" stage. Change is hard. Julianna may be resisting having her little sister grow up, which is a common situation in a family.

What About Inner Conflict?

Though this guide focuses on conflict between individuals, it's necessary to also mention inner conflict. Inner conflict may occur at decision-making time, when two or more alternatives seem viable. It may also occur when what we are doing or are considering is contrary to our own value system. Inner conflict is, without doubt, something that causes discomfort. If inner conflict isn't dealt with, or problems are not solved satisfactorily, discouragement or even serious depression can result.

A person can be so torn when trying to deal with a difficult situation that they find it hard to think clearly or to keep on task. Dealing with inner conflict requires a lot of inner thought processing. It may also require communicating with another individual who has experienced similar situations or who understands your value system.

How The Past Can Affect Conflict

In the early years of their marriage, Marie and David went through some challenges, including differences of opinion about money. Also, David felt that Marie's mother interfered in their relationship too much, and Marie felt David spent too much time with guy friends. That was all ten years ago. They are still together and doing much better. But when a disagreement arises, the hurt feelings of the past always seem to come up.

As humans, we tend to hold on to old grudges. We can carry the baggage of old hurts around with us for years, and the problems of the past can destroy any current happiness.

We can continue to carry baggage if the issues were never dealt with at the time. Sometimes all a person needs to drop past hurts is an acknowledgment from others that what happened was hurtful. Since those acknowledgments aren't always forthcoming, it's often necessary to work this through by one's self.

Forgiveness is one way to deal with focusing on the past. Forgiving the other person for any wrongs, real or perceived, not only helps mend the relationship, but takes a huge load off our own chest.

Another method is to stick with the subject. We could call failure to do this "dumping it over the fence." If a couple disagrees about disciplining children and suddenly the topic turns to something said years ago, then we are dumping it over the fence. Leave the past in the past. Focus on the issues at hand and deal with them fully and fairly.

How Can Conflicts Best Be Managed?

Choose Your Battles Carefully

Jennifer, age 12, wears her hair in a ponytail a lot of the time. Her mother wants her to do her hair differently. It's creating friction between Jennifer and her mother.

First of all, consider what you hope the outcome would be for discussing the conflict you are concerned about. Is the issue important enough to work on, to spend the time on, or to even risk further damage to the relationship? Like two children fighting over a half stick of gum, as adults we sometimes become "bent out of shape" over issues not major enough to justify the conflict created.

While parental guidance is extremely important to helping young people become productive and healthy adults, we need to decide which issues are really important and need to be resolved, and which ones, such as the ponytail issue above, may not be worth disrupting family harmony.

Remain Calm

We cannot solve problems when we are angry. Conflicts can only be managed when both or all participants are calm enough to discuss the issues reasonably. Anger only makes things worse. The good news is we can learn to manage our anger.

If you find yourself becoming angry, it is best to take a step back, both physically and emotionally. Actually step back from the person and put a little space between you. This in itself can help you to start to feel more calm. Take a deep breath. Count to 10.

If you're still experiencing the physical energy that anger creates, say "I am too upset to talk about this right now, I need to cool down." Then go do something to use up the energy. Walk, run, punch a pillow. Don't use this as an excuse to rid yourself of the issue, but do go back and continue the discussion after you are calm.

Listen, Listen, Listen

Ruth Ann's son recently married Stephanie, a girl that Ruth Ann didn't really know very well. Stephanie's parents were comfortable financially, and she has quite a few nice things. Ruth Ann knows that the salaries of both young people are small as they are just getting started, and she fears that Stephanie is being extravagant. Though Stephanie has told her that she already had certain clothes and some pieces of furniture before they married, Ruth Ann keeps after her to be more frugal. Recently Stephanie showed Ruth Ann a budget that she and her new husband had worked out, but Ruth Ann just shook her head and walked away. Ruth Ann is worried and Stephanie is frustrated and confused. The relationship is off to a rocky start.

Avoid assumptions. Don't presume to know what the other person is thinking. Listen. Look. Avoid formulating your response and just listen. Try to see the issue from the other person's standpoint. This is not the same as giving in or just letting them have their way. Seeing the issue from another person's standpoint can help you both to work through the issue. Lack of willingness to see his or her point can make you seem like a bully. Jumping to conclusions can put such a roadblock in the midst of a conflict that the problem can drag on and on.

Avoid Accusations

Moisha is fairly new in her supervisory position. She is sometimes surprised to find that her staff reacts negatively to her requests. Today, she was about to tell a staff member, "You should have added the statistics from the report in with this document." But having learned to avoid making a request sound like an accusation, instead she says, "It looks like I'm going to need the statistics from the report in here. Could you add them for me?" She is pleased that her request is met with a smile and compliance.

Sentences that start "You always...", "You never...", "You should have...", "You can't...", cause barriers to come up and doors to slam. They cut off communication before it even gets a chance to start. Instead, start your discussion with "I wonder if ...," "I feel..." or "I have been thinking..."

While these "I" messages may seem artificial at first, you can easily adjust them to your own language, and once you

become familiar with their use, you will find they are extremely effective in opening the way for people to discuss issues.

Not only does this means of communication put the other person more at ease, it is often also effective in helping you remain calm yourself.

Don't Pull Rank

Though it's important that everyone knows who is in charge, it's also important for everyone to feel an valued part of the whole, whether it be families or work places. A parent who says "You will do this because I said so," is being autocratic, which is often ineffective in helping a child develop self-discipline. A boss who does the same thing is often seen as a tyrant. It sounds like "I win, you lose." Even though a person who uses this approach may believe it makes them look powerful, it often leads to disrespect instead.

Compromise

Jason and Tiffany are going through a divorce. They both want to have their child, Zoey, on Thanksgiving Day. Since they both realize the importance of the holidays to their families, they decide to compromise and take turns having her every other year.

In some situations, it works well for each person to give a little, and meet in the middle on a common ground. A good thing about compromise is that it helps each person recognize the needs of the other. Compromise is not always the best solution. For example, it is not usually good to compromise on moral issues. Compromise sounds like "I win a little, you win a little."

Don't Drag the Conflict Out

Victor and Tom are middle-aged brothers. For many years, they have kept a running disagreement about how their late father would have wanted them to run their family business. Even though some of the issues are far in the past, they still carry on the dispute. Finally, Victor said, "You know, we're never going to know for sure how Dad would have wanted the business run. We just need to move on from here." At last, Tom agrees.

One of the most damaging kinds of conflict is the kind that never seems to end. Each person starts to feel hopeless. Sometimes this happens if one person decides to just give in or give up. There are some issues with no really good, viable solutions because of differences in values, perceptions, personalities, and experiences of the people involved. But because this approach to conflict sounds like "I lose, you lose," it's not a successful means to an end. Instead, with the conflict pushed underground, it can rise to the surface again and again.

Sometimes it works to agree to disagree. For some situations, it offers at least a release from the struggle. Though less than ideal, this may be better than continuing to focus on the differences.

Don't Avoid Conflict Because of Fears

Conflict doesn't need to be a negative influence on a family or work situation. It can be productive and can result in vast improvements and creative solutions.

Some people see human relationships as extremely fragile, and fear taking a stand will lose them the relationship or the job. In this case, they may try so hard to placate the other person that they end up producing greater damage. This sounds like "I lose, you win."

Those who take a back seat to the needs and interests of others often deny themselves. This can even lead to inviting others to take further advantage of them.

Consider Putting It On Paper

Sometimes a situation looks different, and a little easier to understand, when it is put on paper. Draw a diagram of it. This could involve various circles that indicate "what if." "What would happen if we did this?" List pros and cons. Though putting it all on paper may seem a little formal for some situations, it can be extremely effective in reducing conflicts between personalities. It can also help avoid accusations. It may feel a little scientific, but can have excellent results.

Create a Win-Win Situation

For successful conflict management, everyone can work toward understanding the viewpoints of the other people involved, communicating well, and being willing to consider options. The results can be a synthesis of the needs, wants, and goals of each person involved.

When this "I win, you win" approach is taken, the outcome is satisfaction because everyone is considered. This can be accomplished by focusing on the issue, not on personalities and problems. By aiming toward a positive outcome for all, the solution provides a step up in the relationship or business, not a hole which will need mending later.

Agree On Some Rules For Conflict Management

Though each group may come up with their own rules, here are some that can be helpful.

1. Each person can have a say.
2. Do not interrupt until that person has stated his or her idea. Listen.

3. Do not belittle anyone.
4. Focus on the issue.
5. It's okay to disagree, but it's not okay to be disagreeable.
6. Work toward solutions, not on problems of the past. Complaints without solutions are just noise.
7. Don't dump things over the fence.
8. Remain calm.
9. Take a break when you need to, but always come back.
10. Be open and honest.

Summary

Individual differences can be seen as frustrating and confusing, or as the spice of life. When disagreements are turned into creative problem solving, the results are more effective, and more fulfilling, more workable, than maintaining the status quo. Focus on what the other person needs, wants, or thinks. Work through the situation in positive, respectful ways to the benefit of all involved.

Resources

- Billikopf, G., *Conflict Management Skills*. Regents of the University of California. 2001 <http://www.cnr.berkeley.edu/ucce50/ag-labor/7labor/13.htm>
- Allen, R., et. al. *Parents Forever*. University of Minnesota. 2000. <http://www.extension.umn.edu/>

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