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## Conflict Resolution

### **Introduction**

Conflict, as defined by freedictionary is “A. state of often prolonged, fighting; B. A state of disharmony between incompatible or antithetical persons, ideas or interests.” Conflict in the Webster dictionary is defined as “A. Competitive or opposing actions of incompatibles: (antagonistic state of actions of divergent ideas, interests or persons); B. Mental struggle”.

### **Why Do We have Conflict**

Conflict occurs when two parties, or people, have separate viewpoints, or feelings, about an issue and suddenly clash. Generally, it is when an issue, idea, or need is important to one person or side and is not perceived to be important or valued by the opposing party or side. They may, or may not, be aware of this difference immediately. Others around them may be picking up on the subtle signs of their differences; or, the differing viewpoints may be causing one person great stress while the other goes about his/her business completely unaware and unaffected. Or, both may be greatly stressed and unaware of the others' distress; or, both may be readily aware of the differences and others' distress.

In any of these scenarios, the conflict is there, it is real and, unless resolved, it may create more problems than either person, or party, can imagine. Conflict erodes one's character, one's mood, the organizational structure, feelings of trust, feelings of closeness, previous feelings of appreciation, feelings of value and belonging, decreases one's desire to be committed to the cause at hand, and much more. So, what to do.

### **Why Do We Avoid Conflict**

Understanding how to resolve conflict will be easier when we understand why we may first have difficulties confronting conflict. According to Ting-Tooney (1994), people tend to avoid conflict most frequently because of fear. Thoughts and feelings of: “Why should I talk to her, she'll bite my head off and not listen to anything I have to say”, or, “I should talk to him about this problem but maybe it will just go away on its own; no sense stirring up something that makes us both miserable”, or “If I go to him, I'm making myself vulnerable; No, that's his responsibility, he should come to me and ask me to talk”.

All of these responses include thoughts, feelings and behaviors that prevent us from resolving the conflicts that occur in our daily lives with others from our friends, teachers, supervisors, bosses, parents, strangers on the street, college professors, disability service personnel, store clerks, and the list goes on and on. And, so what happens?

### **The Power Differentiation**

There is another reason people are reluctant to confront conflict. This is referred to as power differentiation, either perceived or otherwise. According to Blatner (2002), this happens when:

- A Your opponent seems more powerful than you
- B Your opponent seems less powerful than you
- B Your opponent thinks s/he is more/less powerful than you
- C Others around are more/less likely to empathize or side with you or with your opponent.
- D Your opponent does / does not share your assessment of the power grading between you.

Variables that influence power include age, gender, ethno-racial differences, disability differences, experience, cultural differences, emotional intensity, rank in the organization, verbal skillfulness, degree of neediness, socio-economic class, manipulation, past experience with the party, relationship, and individual perception.

One last reason why it may be difficult to engage in conflict negotiation is that our society rewards those who do not. According to Ting-Tooney (1994), “society tends to reward alternative responses to conflict rather than negotiation”. People who aggressively pursue their needs are often either rejected or disdained by others. Those who raise issues and concerns, regardless of how respectful and tactful they are, are quickly to be perceived as “problem clients” or “problem staff members” and minimized, avoided and in many instances reprimanded or ridiculed.

### **Why Resolve the Conflict**

This sounds pretty daunting, especially to the more intimidated, less assertive of us out here. Why should we resolve the conflict then? Just take the easy-way-out approach and let it go? After all, it cannot last forever, nothing does and they’ll just get over it, right? Well, not necessarily. And, the impact that happens to you and others in the interim may not be worth that easy-way-out.

1 Your stress level rises causing adverse physical responses creating a home for health problems for you., e.g., high blood pressure, risk of diabetes, obesity if you eat ore when stressed, malnourishment if you eat less when stressed, mood changes

2 The Conflict does not just go away. Instead, it lurks quietly in the background growing bigger and bigger, like a blown up pilates ball waiting to burst. And, even if that one does not burst, the next one that comes up, or the next, that old conflict which was not resolved will, eventually, come rolling down from the attic causing hurt feelings and all those problems described above. .

## Steps for Resolving Conflict

- 1 **Pick Your Battles:** It is not necessary to choose to engage in conflict over everything. Many things in life, we can simply choose to let go and never engage in conflict at all. Realizing that we cannot control others nor do we have the right to control others is a start to deciding which things are necessary to engage in conflict.
- 2 **Know Your Needs:** Do you really need this, or, do you just want it? If you need something, it is probably worth going for with the expectation that you have a right to some accommodation or recognition. If it is a want, then it may be worth considering whether it is worth going for because you may be able to get your want fulfilled in another, easier and more satisfying way. You have the right to your needs; you need to fulfill your own wants in life, and it is essential to learn to distinguish between the two.
- 3 **Enter into the negotiation with a “listening stance” and the desire for resolution**
- 4 **Identify a safe place for negotiation to take place, one that is neutral to both parties if you can, e.g., not your house, their office.**
- 5 **Assert your needs (not wants) clearly and specifically, e.g., “I need my books in large print, how can we do this?” not, “You need to get my books for me.”**
- 6 **Approach problem-solving with flexibility. Be willing to discuss and create as many possibilities as you can with your opponent.**
- 7 **Manage impact with calm, quiet, patience and respect. However, this does not mean accepting disrespect. Calm statements of, “I need to work with you on this and can only do so as long as we are listening and respecting”, not “You will respect me”.**
- 8 **Build an agreement that works for both parties.**
- 9 **Drop the right/wrong attitude. No one is right, no one is wrong; no one is good, no one is bad. Both parties are simply in disagreement on an issue that needs to be resolved.**
- 10 **Do not bring into the discussion past issues, and do not allow them to be brought in. Keep the focus on the present issue.**
- 10 **Own, Accept and acknowledge your own mistakes, not the mistakes of your opponent. Allow him/her to do the same if s/he does or will. Apologize and make amends where and when you can.**
- 11 **Email and texting is not the preferred means of resolving conflict, however many people will attempt to do so and will not offer or accept any other option. When this happens, simply state your needs, clearly and concisely. Do not accept disrespect and be aware that email often**

looks or sounds harsher than was intended. If, after the second exchange, pick up the phone or meet face-to-face and absolutely refuse to engage in a third exchange.

Begin sentences with “I”, e.g., I feel, I need; not “You”. And, realize that no one makes you feel, think or do anything.

12 Discard NEVER and Always from your statements. These are generalizations and rarely true.

13 Transform the situation into one where the resistant person recognizes the potential benefits of a negotiated process, e.g., the benefits to him/her.

14 Focus on things one can do or what can be versus what one cannot do or cannot be done, and again, do not focus on the past. Focus on the present.

15 Focus on preventing future conflicts; What can I do to keep this happening in the future? I may not be able to do anything now so what can I do to keep it from happening again?

### The Unwilling People

Unfortunately, no matter how adept you might be at resolving conflict, there will simply be people out there who will not 1. Have your skills; or 2. Have your willingness to resolve the conflict. This cannot be taken personally, it is about them, not you. You have done your best and must realize that. It takes a tremendous amount of courage to place yourself in a position of recognizing and resolving conflict.

When the conflict must, simply must, be resolved; or, when it becomes clear that you do not have the skills, or, when the power differentiation is truly apparent, several approaches work well:

1 Get an Advocate: Advocates are either volunteer or paid people who advocate for your needs. They should advocate specifically on your behalf and for you.

2 Involve a mediator. These are people who are either volunteers or paid. They should have had mediator training or Conflict Resolution training, and should understand the principles of Conflict Resolution. Trusted friends and family might, initially, sound like a great idea but may, in the end, not be.

3 Perhaps counseling, psychotherapy or courses in Assertive Training would be helpful. As daunting and overwhelming as it seems, you can often learn to do what the Advocates and Mediators do every day yourself. However, it is okay to utilize these services recognizing when it is You on the proverbial chopping block, even the best mediator or Advocate can lose their skills.

4 As a last resort, if it is a legal issue or you think it might be, consult with an attorney. Most will offer free consultations and advise you further.

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