



Turn Conflict Into a Productive Conversation

Peace is not the absence of conflict, it is the ability to handle conflict by peaceful means.

Ronald Reagan

How to Handle Conflict Effectively

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What is the first thought that springs to mind when you hear the word “conflict”? Is it stress, anger, battle, fight, fear, frustration, argument? These are mostly negative terms. What about more positive outcomes? Some say conflict can solve problems, stimulate discussions, strengthen relationships, improve communication, clear the air, or lead to good decisions.

Conflict is neither inherently negative nor intrinsically positive. Rather, it’s how you manage the conflict that determines how you perceive it, and ultimately how it plays out. If you handle conflict well, it can be a constructive, unifying force. Handle it poorly, however, and it becomes a destructive agent. No wonder conflict stresses us out, and we try to avoid it. Learning to deal with conflict in a positive way is what we need to do, because it won’t “go away” by itself. In fact, left unaddressed, conflict usually gets worse, a lot worse.

Strive to See Both Sides

Think of a recent conflict you’ve experienced. How did it go? Were you able to listen to what the other side had to say? Or did you get so entrenched in your own views that you spent all your time trying to invalidate the other person’s beliefs? This story line plays itself out every day in our current political environment, and it exemplifies how poor conflict management leads to division.

This occurs for several reasons. Because our values often define us, we struggle when someone holds opposing or different ones. We try to prove we are right, and in doing that, we invalidate the other person’s values. Our words and actions put the other party on the defensive. We become so entrenched in championing our own perspective that we fail to remember the other person’s values are equally important to them. We don’t actually listen to them.

Do you have a go-to behavior when you find yourself in a conflict situation? Do you recognize any of these typical behaviors people tend to exhibit:

1. Shutting down
2. Talking louder
3. Globalizing (using words such as always, never, every time...)
4. Being sarcastic
5. Asking leading questions (“Don’t you think...?”)
6. Lodging personal attacks

7. Shooting down the other person’s perspective immediately
8. Using the phrase, “Yes, but...” (with the “but” negating everything that comes before it)

As you have probably figured out, these behaviors don’t help to resolve a conflict. Instead, they most often escalate it by invalidating the other person’s point of view.

More Effective Conflict Resolution

So, the big question is, how do we become more effective when dealing with conflict? There is no simple answer. There are no fix-all A, B, Cs that will make your conflicts disappear. However, switching your goal from eliminating all conflict, to having the right type of conflict, is a good first step. Your goal should be to find ways to handle conflict constructively, and ideally, to use the conflict to drive innovation, improve communication, and make good decisions.



After deciding to openly participate in the conflict, try to be flexible. Adapt your approach to deal with others. Behavioral style models, such as DISC,

teach us that people fall into four main behavioral styles, and that each style has unique needs and methods of responding. We tend to believe that everyone thinks (or should think) the way we do. The truth is, only a quarter of the people have the same behavioral style you do. The rest of the population has a different view of the world. Being able to adapt your approach in ways that respect the needs and behavioral styles of others is a proactive first step in conflict management.

(This article has been adapted from the course, ReDIScovering Conflict, offered by Kim H Consulting.)



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