



Unit 15

Conflict Management Process

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Understand what conflict is and how it can escalate.
- ✓ Recognize the five most common conflict resolution styles and when to use them.
- ✓ Increase positive information flow through non-verbal and verbal communication skills.

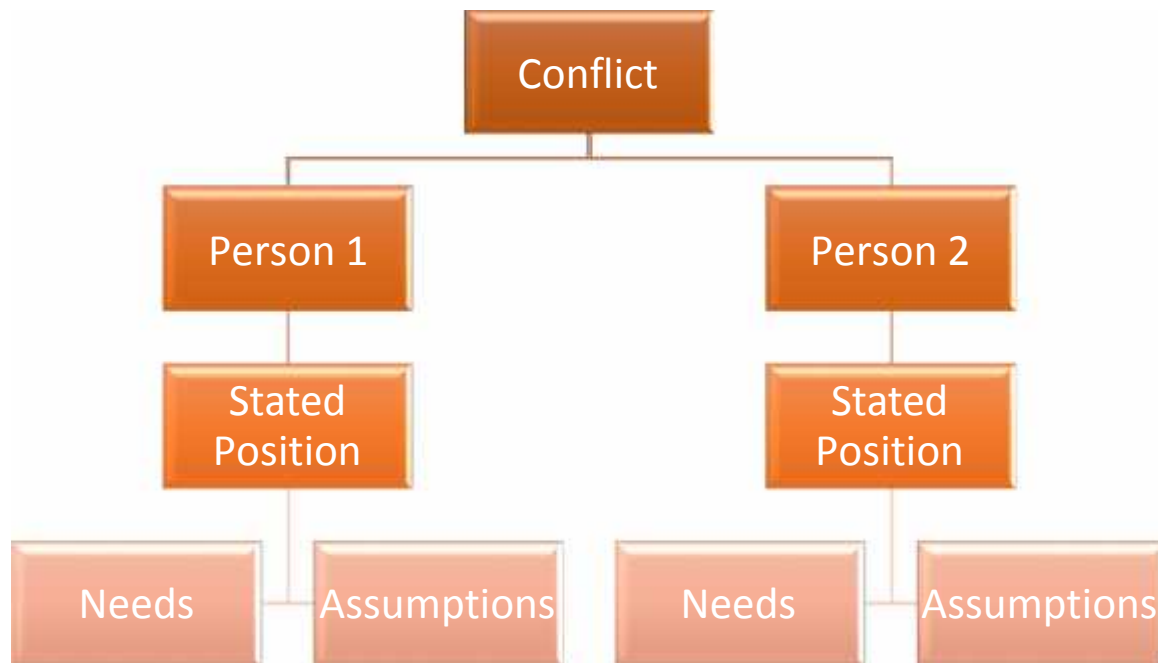
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Visualizing Conflict

Here are several ways of depicting or visualizing a conflict situation.

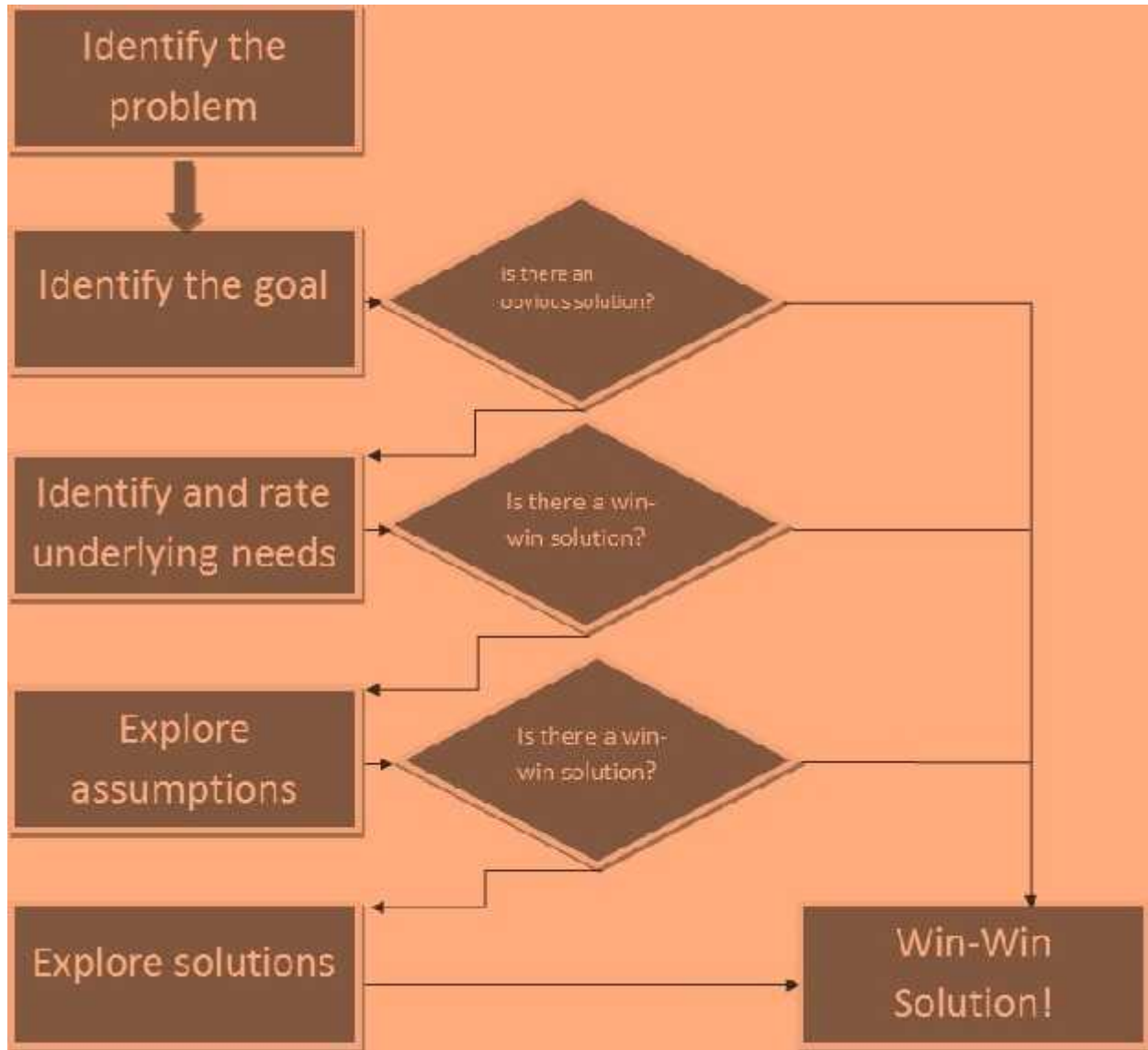
Needs and Assumptions Model



Each person's stated position is driven by a set of **needs**. Some needs are stronger than others. Driving those needs are **assumptions** about how needs can be filled, about how the world works, and about what is possible and what is not. Assumptions can be opinions, beliefs, or facts.

Conflict Resolution Process

A conflict can be resolved at any level – position, needs, or assumptions. It's best to start from the surface and work your way down.



Assumptions when Using the Conflict Resolution Process

Assume the other person has a valid, reasonable, rational position from his/her point of view. The goal is not to prove him/her wrong but to find a win/win solution to the problem. As well, assume that there is a possible solution that satisfies both of your needs, but you must be willing to explore solutions other than the one you have already settled on. Check your motives before you begin. Are you looking for a win/win solution?

Hands-On Steps

Step One: Identify the Problem

- Ñ Write the overall problem statement.
- Ñ Using effective listening, solicit the other person's stated position and record it on a sticky note. Then, switch roles and repeat.

- Ñ Identify if there are any areas of agreement.
- Ñ Clarify areas of disagreement.

Step Two: Identify the Common Goal

- Ñ Define a common goal that both parties agree to.
- Ñ Do a process and content check.

Step Three: Identify and Rate Underlying Needs

- Ñ Identify the other person's needs and place each one on a sticky note. Have the other person rate their needs on a scale from 1 – 10. Then, switch roles and repeat.
- Ñ Identify any common needs.
- Ñ Test if there is a possible win/win situation.
- Ñ Do a process and content check.

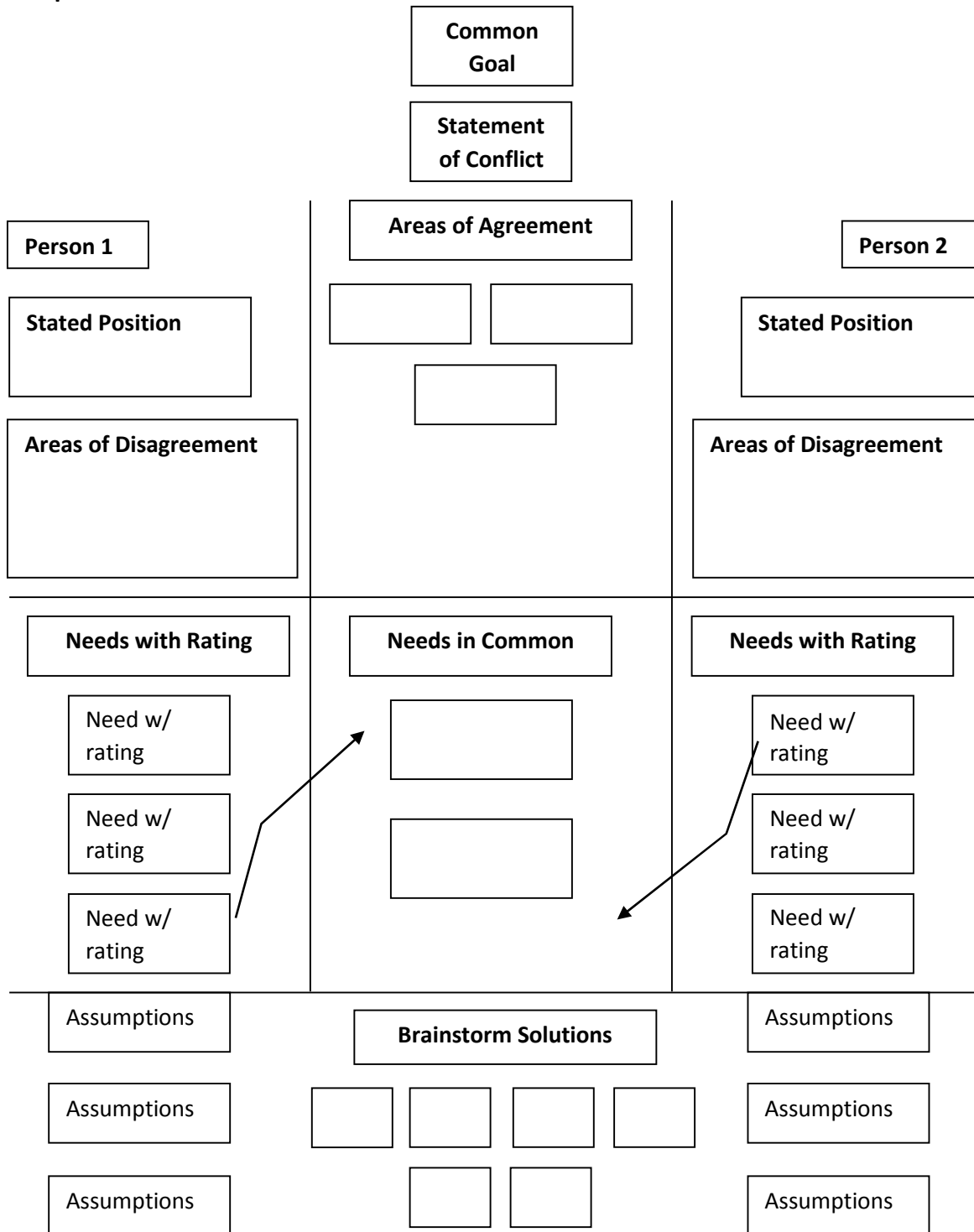
Step Four: Explore Assumptions

- Ñ Brainstorm assumptions for each person.
- Ñ Gently challenge assumptions using facts and data.
- Ñ Check for themes.
- Ñ Test if there is a possible win/win solution.
- Ñ Do a process and content check.

Step Five: Brainstorm Solutions and Choose One

- Ñ Brainstorm potential solutions.
- Ñ Check brainstorming options against each person's rated needs.
- Ñ Choose a solution, or combine multiple solutions.
- Ñ Develop an implementation plan if needed.

Template



A Strategy for Conflict Resolution

Phase One: Identify the Problem (Use Color 1)

- Ñ Tape a sheet of flip chart paper to the wall.
- Ñ Write the overall problem (statement of conflict) on a sticky note. Place it on the flip chart.
- Ñ Have Person 1 relate his/her stated position without providing the reasons for the position. The other person should practice active listening. When they fully understand the problem from the other person's point of view, they should write it on a sticky note and place it below and to the left of the statement of conflict note.
- Ñ Then, switch roles and repeat this process.
- Ñ Identify areas of agreement. Write these on sticky notes and place them between the two positions. Is there an obvious solution that satisfies both parties? If so, the conflict is resolved. If not, proceed.
- Ñ Identify areas of disagreement. Place these sticky notes underneath the statements of conflict.

Phase Two: Identify the Common Goal (Use Color 2)

- Ñ Define a common goal that both parties share which overrides the present conflict. (Examples: solving the problem in a way that maintains the relationship.)
- Ñ Write the goal on a sticky note and place it on the top of the chart above the statement of the problem.
- Ñ Do a process and content check: is the conflict defined too broadly? Too narrowly? Is there an obvious solution? If so, the conflict is resolved.
- Ñ Does each person feel heard/listened to at this point? Does each person feel his/her position is being taken seriously?

Phase Three: Identify and Rate Underlying Needs (Use Color 3)

- Ñ Person 2 should ask Person 1 what his/her needs are. Each need should be written on a sticky note and placed underneath the stated problem.
- Ñ Person 1 should rate his/her needs, using a 1-10 scale, with 10 being a very high level need and 1 being a minimal need.
- Ñ Switch roles and repeat these steps.
- Ñ Identify needs that both parties have in common. Write these between the two columns.
- Ñ Test if there is a possible win/win solution.
- Ñ Do a process and content check. Is the conflict defined properly, or is something else really in conflict and the statement is just symptomatic of it? Revise the statement of conflict if necessary. Does each person feel listened to? Validated?

Phase Four: Explore Assumptions (Use Color 4)

- Ñ Brainstorm the assumptions driving each person's position or needs. The other person should ask and record. Do not challenge assumptions during the brainstorming process. Just write them down.
- Ñ Each person can offer up any assumptions he/ she thinks the other person may hold. These can only be added if the other person agrees.
- Ñ If there are facts or data to challenge an assumption, discuss the facts or data and the person's assumption. The sticky note can only be changed if the person agrees.
- Ñ Check the assumptions to see if there are any themes. If there are, record these on sticky notes.
- Ñ Test if there is a possible win/win solution.
- Ñ Do a process and content check: Is the conflict defined properly or is there something else that is really in conflict and the statement of conflict is just a symptom of something else that is going on. Revise the statement of conflict if necessary. Have all the key assumptions surfaced? Does each person feel listened to? Validated?

Phase Five: Brainstorm Solutions and Choose One (Color 5)

- Ñ Brainstorm potential solutions. Write each idea on a sticky note, with no judgment. Generate ideas that might challenge the basic assumptions that are driving the needs and therefore positions.
- Ñ Check brainstormed solutions against common goals and each person's most important needs. (You can use a decision matrix to make the comparisons. Substitute needs with their ratings for the decision criteria and weights.)
- Ñ Choose a solution. Make sure the solution meets both parties' highly-rated needs. Check that the potential solution satisfies the common goal.
- Ñ Develop an implementation plan if necessary.

Helping Others through Conflict

Preparing for Conflict

Each of us has had some experience with conflict, so now that you know a little bit more about conflict styles, how can you prepare for conflict situations? How or where do you get information about how the other person might be thinking or feeling? What are your hot buttons; the issues and behaviors that make you react or get angry?

The most important part of preparation is **attitude**. Reminding ourselves of our conflict management skills can help us deal with our fears. We can also adopt the attitude that there is more than one way to cut up the pie, and quite likely more than one way to satisfy concerns.

Good preparation can also mean the difference between success and failure. It is the most critical element in achieving your objectives. **Know the issues involved**; know what you and your organization want to achieve. Look at the situation from the other person's perspective. Plan your strategy.

Do your homework so you really know what's fair. Find out what is common practice. Look at the situation through the other person's eyes. Brainstorm some options with your colleagues.

Know your hot buttons. What makes you feel angry, defensive, fearful, or guilty? These are your stressors. What are the long-term effects of feeling stressed or fearful? (Examples: Fatigue, high blood pressure, heart disease, insomnia, absenteeism.) Life isn't fun any longer.

As long as there are negative emotions, what will happen to the conflict situation?

During our preparation, we should have already **dealt with our own emotions**. To overcome our fear, we will face it and just keep going in spite of it. To overcome our anger, we have to recognize it isn't going to get us what we want.

Can you think of a time when you responded to a sales clerk or waiter or gas pump attendant with anger and got even worse service than you were originally complaining about?

Pour oil on the troubled waters. Try helping the other party regain their control and mental balance, and get them to listen.

Sometimes **past habits** can get in our way, or in the way of the other party. Do you have any examples you can think of? Have you ever tried to discuss issues with anybody who just won't discuss or negotiate, who responds, "Whatever you decide is all right with me?" We can carry past desires to give in, to please, or to respond with aggression and anger, into our conflict situations.

Have you ever encountered **skepticism** when you were trying to win people to your way of thinking? For example, when you are from a government agency, skepticism is apt to be high, perhaps based on past experiences or just the general perception about government as a bureaucracy.

Change the game and bridge the gap. Engage the other person in mutual problem solving.

Power is another challenge. Most of us tend to rate our own power as too low. Power is whatever you think it is. If you think you have no bargaining chips, you don't. You have to help both yourself and the other party understand there might be a win/win resolution to an issue if both parties are willing to look for them.

Make it easy for the other party to **say yes**. Make it hard to say no.

The final and most difficult challenge is to **remain calm** in the face of all these challenges. Once we start getting emotional too, the ball game is almost over. No matter what the situation, two angry, frustrated, and/or overwrought individuals will seldom be able to think through a solution that works, or that people feel good about.

Conflict Resolution with Facilitation

Sometimes you find yourself in the role of facilitator when others are disagreeing over issues. Or, you may find yourself intervening between two individuals or two groups. Here are some techniques that you can use in these situations.

Give It a Name

Sometimes simply identifying and describing a destructive behavior is enough to change that behavior. Be sure to check for agreement after your process of observation.

Examples:

- Ñ “You’re not letting John finish his report.”
- Ñ “I think you are trying to force a decision before you are ready.”
- Ñ “It seems to me that...”

Check for Agreement

Any time you make a statement or propose a process, give the group an opportunity to respond. Don’t assume they are with you; take the time to ask.

Examples:

- Ñ “Do you agree?”
- Ñ “Alright?”
- Ñ “Okay?”

A powerful way of checking is to look for the negative. Make silence a sign of confirmation. Rather than saying, “Do you all agree with me?” you could ask:

- Ñ “Are there any objections?”
- Ñ “If there are no objections, we’ll move on to ...”
- Ñ “Is there anyone who can’t live with that decision?”

Avoid Process Battles

Don’t let people get locked into arguments about what the best way to proceed is. Point out that you can try a number of things to keep things moving along.

Examples:

- Ñ “We can try both approaches. Which one would you like to try first?”
- Ñ “Can we agree to cover both topics in the remaining time? Okay, which do you want to start with?”

Echo

Don't get backed into answering questions the group should be answering for themselves. Skillfully rebound the question back to the group.

Examples:

- Ñ **Group member:** Facilitator, which problem should we deal with first?
- Ñ **Facilitator:** That's up to the group. Which do you think we should discuss first?

- Ñ **Group member addressing the facilitator:** What was the inflation rate for last year?
- Ñ **Facilitator:** Who can answer that question?

- Ñ **Group member:** I don't like the track we are taking here.
- Ñ **Facilitator:** What do you think we should do? (Avoid being defensive)

Keep the Group on Track

When the group has gotten off track or the discussion has broken down, playing dumb is a way of getting the group to focus on its own process by having to explain it to you. It's a form of boomeranging, and is easy to do when you are really confused.

Examples:

- Ñ “Can someone tell me what's going on?”
- Ñ “I'm confused. What are we doing now?”
- Ñ “Where are we?”
- Ñ “I'm lost. I thought we were...”

Hold Them to Their Word

Once the group has agreed to a procedure, your credibility and neutrality may be at stake if you don't enforce that agreement.

Examples:

- Ñ “Wait a second. You agreed to do a fishbone diagram, but now you're taking a vote.”
- Ñ “Harry, please let John finish.”
- Ñ “Sorry, Beth. I'm afraid your time is up.”

Encourage and Compliment

Sometimes, the group may need to be encouraged to keep going until they reach a solution.

- Ñ “Could you say more about that?”
- Ñ “Please stick with it for a little longer.”
- Ñ “Keep going. I think this is useful.”

Deal With/Accept/Legitimize/Defer

It is important to deal with doubt and criticism. One strategy is to **accept** or **legitimize** the group member’s feelings. You could say something like, “You’re not convinced we’re getting anywhere? Perhaps you’re right. How does the rest of the group feel?”

You can also try persuading them to give it more time by saying something like, “Are you willing to hang on for 10 more minutes and see what happens?”

Don’t Be Defensive

If you are challenged, don’t argue or become defensive. Accept the criticism, thank the individual for the comment, and return the issue back to the individual or group.

Examples:

- Ñ “I cut you off before you were finished? I apologize. Please continue.”
- Ñ “You think I’m pushing too hard?” (Lots of nods) “Thank you for telling me. How would you like to proceed from here?”

Use Your Body Language

Many of these interventions and preventions can be reinforced, and sometimes even made, by the movement of your body or hands.

Examples:

- Ñ Regaining focus by standing up and moving into the middle of the group.
- Ñ Enforcing a process argument by holding up your hand to keep someone from interrupting.
- Ñ Encouraging someone by gesturing with your hand.

Keep It Simple

The better facilitator you become, the fewer words you will have to use. When you have really done a good job, the group may leave thinking they can do it without you next time. Use your hands, eye contact, and partial sentences to communicate economically.

Examples:

- Ñ “I’m sorry. You were saying that...”

- Ñ “Could you say that again?”
- Ñ “The point you were making was...”

Setting Norms

Any time you anticipate that a session has the potential to become contentious (or if the group has had stormy meetings in the past), it's a good idea to create specially-targeted norms for conflict situations. As with all other norms, these are created by the members of the group, preferably at the start of the session. Use the following questions to trigger the discussion:

- Ñ What behaviors and rules should we follow if we find ourselves moving into disagreement and potential conflict?
- Ñ What can we do to ensure that we have a good debate instead of a heated argument?

Some sample norms targeted at conflict situations include:

- Ñ We'll speak one at a time.
- Ñ We'll look at each other when we speak and acknowledge any valid points made by the other person.
- Ñ We'll accept all ideas as valid when presented.
- Ñ We'll build on each other's ideas.
- Ñ We won't dismiss any idea without really exploring it.
- Ñ We'll make sure everyone is heard.
- Ñ We won't get emotional, argumentative, or personal.
- Ñ No one will attack anyone else.
- Ñ If the discussion gets heated or we start going in circles, we'll call a time-out and look at how we are doing things.
- Ñ No one will deliberately block the group from reaching a final solution by taking a position.
- Ñ We'll take a systematic approach to resolving issues rather than just pushing personal points of view.

Once conflict norms are established, they should be referred to at strategic moments to make sure they're being followed. Sometimes adding a new norm in the middle of a conflict discussion helps to stabilize the situation.

You can try any of the following techniques to apply pressure:

- Ñ Start off the session by asking a sequence of challenging questions designed to raise issues and create discontent with the present situation.
- Ñ Divide members into subgroups of two to three people to explore the most contentious issues and generate solutions. Share these solutions with the entire group. Post the best ideas and keep reminding members to act on them.

At the mid-way point in the session (i.e. before they go off on a break or lunch) post a survey to help the group assess the session so far. Share the outcome and discuss what can be done about any low ratings. You can use the following format.

Sample Survey

We are really making meaningful progress.



We are dealing with the right issues.



We are being totally honest and open.



Our solutions are really innovative and will generate major improvements.



Coaching Through Conflict

One of our roles as a leader is to help others. The ability to help others improve their skills and attitudes is both rare and important.

What is coaching? It's that one-on-one mentoring that helps people develop their skills, set goals, and understand your company's success. Coaching is a way of telling the truth, confronting tough issues, and using language to inspire.

The secrets of successful coaching? Build on the positive, be diplomatic with the negative, and never, ever yell.

When you are helping your team deal with the inevitable conflicts that come up in the workplace, help them to build their listening skills. This includes the ability to:

- Ñ Make eye contact
- Ñ Use supportive body language
- Ñ Acknowledge what the other person is saying or feeling
- Ñ Use open-ended questions

When you are working with people in conflict, help each of them tell their side of the story without interruptions. Typically, there are two competing factors in a conflict:

- Ñ **Desire to achieve their personal goals or objectives:** They are in conflict because you have a goal that conflicts with another person’s goal. Their goal may be of importance to them, or it may be of little importance.
- Ñ **Keeping a good relationship with the other person:** They may need to interact effectively with the other person in the future. The relationship may be very important to them, or it may be of little importance.
- Ñ How important each of these items (their goals and the relationship) are to them also affects how they act in a conflict.

Managing Your Emotions

One of the hardest parts of learning how to manage conflict is managing your own emotions. It can help to outline various scenarios beforehand and how you can cope.

Think of one or two difficult situations and complete the table below.

Provocative situation	What I Expect from the Other Person	How I Can Take Responsibility and Control

The Positive Effect

Being positive is contagious! What can you do as an individual to be a positive influence? Try these recommendations:

- Ñ Keep yourself in a positive mood.
- Ñ Induce positive effect in others.
- Ñ Find everyday uppers.
- Ñ Offer help whenever you can.
- Ñ Be kind.

Fifteen Steps for Dealing with Upset People

1. Be glad when a person shares their feelings of discontent with you. It implies that the person still has confidence in your interest in the problem and your ability to do something about it.
2. Think of the situation as an opportunity to shine.
3. Don't take it personally or become defensive.
4. Show genuine care and concern.
5. Listen.
6. Let the complaining person vent. Don't interrupt with defensiveness.
7. Politely interrupt the upset person and offer guidance.
8. Apologize assertively when you have made a mistake.
9. Express empathy, if it is genuine.
10. Take notes about the situation.
11. Tell the upset person what you can do.
12. Try to find a solution you can both agree on.
13. Thank the person for sharing his or her concern.
14. Follow up later, when appropriate.
15. Phrase your comments positively.

Five Tips for Dealing with Difficult People

1. Maintain a friendly and professional attitude.
2. Acknowledge that a difficult situation exists.
3. Calm the person by questioning and verifying that you understand.
4. Focus the person on the problem.
5. Handle the problem.

Six Steps for Dealing with Angry People

1. Listen closely so you will understand the problem.
2. Ask questions.
3. Apologize.
4. Stay calm and don't take their anger personally.
5. Remain courteous.
6. Propose an action plan and then follow through!

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Stone, Douglas, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen. Difficult Conversations (10th Anniversary Edition). Penguin Books, 2010.*
- ✓ *Weeks, Dudley. The Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution. Tarcher, 2011.*