

The Fundamentals of Conflict Resolution

Conflict arises from differences. It occurs whenever people disagree over their values, motivations, perceptions, ideas, or desires. Sometimes these differences look trivial, but when a conflict triggers strong feelings, a deep personal and relational need is at the core of the problem—a need to feel safe and secure, a need to feel respected and valued, or a need for greater closeness and intimacy.

Recognizing and resolving conflicting needs

If you are out of touch with your feelings or so stressed that you can only pay attention to a limited number of emotions, you won't be able to understand your own needs. If you don't understand your deep-seated needs, you will have a challenging time communicating with others and staying in touch with what is really troubling you. For example, couples often argue about petty differences—the way she hangs the towels, the way he parts his hair—rather than what is really bothering them. In personal relationships, a lack of understanding about differing needs can result in distance, arguments, and breakups. In workplace conflicts, differing needs are often at the heart of bitter disputes. When you can recognize the legitimacy of conflicting needs and become willing to examine them in an environment of compassionate understanding, it opens pathways to creative problem solving, team building, and improved relationships. When you resolve conflict and disagreement quickly and painlessly, mutual trust will flourish.



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Tips for managing and resolving conflict

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Remain calm. Try not to overreact to difficult situations. By remaining calm it will be more likely that others will consider your viewpoint.

Express feelings in words, not actions. Telling someone directly and honestly how you feel can be a very powerful form of communication. If you start to feel so angry or upset that you feel you may lose control, take a "time out" and do something to help yourself feel steadier.

Be specific about what is bothering you. Vague complaints are hard to work on.

Deal with only one issue at a time. Don't introduce other topics until each is fully discussed. This avoids the "kitchen sink" effect where people throw in all their complaints while not allowing anything to be resolved.

No "hitting below the belt." Attacking areas of personal sensitivity creates an atmosphere of distrust, anger, and vulnerability.

Avoid accusations. Accusations will cause others to defend themselves. Instead, talk about how someone's actions made you feel.

Don't generalize. Avoid words like "never" or "always." Such generalizations are usually inaccurate and will heighten tensions.

Avoid "make believe." Exaggerating or inventing a complaint or your feelings about it will prevent the real issues from surfacing. Stick with the facts and your honest feelings.

Don't stockpile. Storing up lots of grievances and hurt feelings over time is counterproductive. It's almost impossible to deal with numerous old problems for which interpretations may differ. Try to deal with problems as they arise.

Avoid clamming up. When one person becomes silent and stops responding to the other, frustration and anger can result. Positive results can only be attained with two-way communication.

Avoiding conflict is often the easiest way to deal with it. It does not however make it go away but rather pushes it underground, only to have it resurface in a new form. By actively resolving conflict when it occurs, it results in a more positive work environment for everyone.

If you can feel yourself losing patience with a conflict situation, it may be time to call in some "fresh perspective" to get you back on track. Call your Employee Assistance Program for assistance to help with individual or workplace conflicts you may be facing.



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