

6 Steps for Resolving a Conflict

By Susan Mayginnnes

Conflict is good. Despite the uncomfortable feelings it brings up, all conflict can be the source of collaboration, creativity and of building deeper relationships.

Think about it: many of the things we have today have come into existence as a solution to conflict. This includes new businesses, products and services.

For example, in a disagreement I once had with a colleague about a workshop design, we were able to design a solution that met both of our needs and our clients' needs in a better way than either of us had originally thought and that generated a new source of revenue for the company we worked for. The creative collaboration produced an idea that was superior to either of the original ideas.

So conflict can actually cause us to get creative, come up with new ideas and work together to find mutually satisfying solutions. In order to do this there are a few things we must do.

1. Give up believing that our idea is the only possible good one.
This is also known as giving up "being right." Be willing to be completely wrong. Or only partially right. The only thing that objects to this at all is our egos.
So you have to ask yourself, what do you want: to be right and satisfy your ego, or come up with a solution that works for everyone? This willingness is the first step toward successfully resolving conflict.
2. Listen first. Get genuinely interested in the other person's perspective.
How do they experience what is happening? Remember that there is no such thing as an "illegitimate feeling" – our feelings are real for us, even if they are based on misunderstandings or false information. What are the needs that the other party is expressing through their demands and complaints? Listen for what is important to them and what values are being expressed. Acknowledge and appreciate what is important to them. Care about them. Not just about you. Then listen closely for what their true needs and values are. Verbally acknowledge what you hear to the other party.
3. Identify your real underlying wants and needs.
What is it that you really want? Why is that important to you? If you had that what would it give you? Is that what you really want, or is it something you think that will get you? Keep asking yourself: What do I want. What do I think it will get me. If I had that then what? Keep asking these questions until you get to the bottom of what you really want. Then tell the truth about your underlying wants and needs. Then let go of the way in which you think that has to be achieved.

4. Separate goals from strategies.

Once you are clear about what is most important to you and to the other parties, become open and creative for finding other ways of fulfilling these desires. For example, many of the times we find that we are arguing over strategies. Get clear about what you are imagining the strategies will give you. Then see if you can find other creative ways to achieve that. This is an opportunity to become creative; to think “outside the box”; to find new possibilities that no one has identified. Often new solutions are far superior to either party’s original ideals. This is the opportunity to work collaboratively toward a creative resolution and desired outcome. The experience of this builds relationship.

5. Make clear agreement going forward.

Avoid future conflicts by getting clear about what each of you are agreeing to and the conditions for fulfillment of the agreements. Many conflicts are generated through misunderstandings of agreements, what the conditions of fulfillment were, or unclear agreements. Make clear requests and capture in writing what each person has agreed to, including timelines. Make sure that everyone involved has a copy of the agreements so that any misunderstandings can be cleared up on the front end. Be sure that you are only making agreements that you fully intend to keep. Avoid coercing the other person into making agreements they do not want to make. This is a set up for later disappointment.

6. Reliably keep your agreements.

It is critical once you have made agreements that you are impeccable about keeping them. If at some point it becomes clear to you that you are unable to keep the agreement or that the agreement is in jeopardy, immediately contact the person with whom you have the agreement and re-negotiate the agreement. Changing agreements on the front end is much less problematic than a broken agreement later. There are always consequences for a broken agreement. This can include: Loss of trust, loss of respect, breakdown of relationships, breakdown of projects, loss of time and money, loss of business. On the other hand, honoring agreements builds trust and relationship.

The two biggest sources of fear in conflict are the following thoughts: “I’m not going to get my needs met,” and “They won’t like me.” When done in this way, conflict does not have to be a divisive experience that causes relationships to deteriorate and leaves people and projects damaged. In fact it can be the source of creativity, can generate a collaborative spirit, and can solve problems and meet true needs in more productive ways. Conflict is inevitable. So don’t avoid it. Look forward to your next conflict as an opportunity to practice creative resolution.