

Conflict 101

Can't We All Just Get Along?

Kevin Cummings

KevinLeeC@yahoo.com

What Is Conflict?

Finish the statement "To me, conflict is like ..."

People tend to use metaphors of violence or struggle to complete this sentence, because most of us avoid conflict at all costs.

We generally don't like conflict because we don't know how to handle it well. We don't know how to handle it well because we've never been taught how. Handling conflict is a skill which can be learned.

Characteristics of Conflict

- Participants are interdependent
- Participants perceive that they seek different outcomes or they favor different means to the same ends
- The conflict has the potential to negatively affect the relationship if not addressed
- There is a sense of urgency about the need to resolve the issue

Relationships

- Relationships are *the* key element in conflict. You *cannot* be in conflict with anyone with whom you don't have a relationship.
- What you are ultimately negotiating in *all* conflicts is your relationship with the other person.
- The level of conflict is closely related to the nature of the relationship. Closer relationships tend to have:
 - More opportunities for conflict
 - A lower threshold of conflict (trivial complaints become significant)
 - More intense conflict (you fight with your family much more fiercely than your down-the-block neighbor)

Stages in Conflict Escalation

- Prelude to Conflict
- Triggering Event
- Initiation of Conflict
- Differentiation
- Resolution

Initiation – The Key Moment in Conflict

- The moment of choice is the key to resolving the conflict
- You only really have four possible paths here:
 - Change the other person
 - Alter the conflict situation
 - Modify your own behavior
 - Accept the people and situation as they are

A Model for Handling Conflict

- **S-TLC**
 - **Stop**
 - **Think**
 - **Listen**
 - **Communicate**

Stop

- Don't just react
- Step away from the conflict to give yourself room to think and pray.

Think

- De-personalize
- Avoid jumping to conclusions.
- Go lightly on yourself and the other person.
- Analyze what's at stake (relationship and substance).
- Ask yourself "What do I really want to accomplish here?"

Listen

- In conflict we tend to take the viewpoint that a good offense is the best defense.
- Concentrate on understanding the other person is saying.
- Listening is a choice, not a skill.
- Listening affirms the humanity of the other person.
 - The *Fisher/Ury Model* of Thinking and Listening
 - Separate the people from the problem
 - We're right back to relationships
 - Focus on "interests" rather than "positions"
 - Generate a variety of options
 - Base the agreement on objective criteria
 - Separate the people from the problem
 - All negotiations have two components substantive issues and the relationship – don't attack the wrong thing
 - Tangling these two things can increase rather than decrease conflict

Strategies to separate the people from the problem:

- Put yourself in their shoes
- Don't deduce their intentions from your fears
- Don't blame them for your problem
- Talk about your perceptions
- Give them a stake in the outcome
- Let them save face

Focus on interests rather than positions

- What's the difference?
- Position – A way to get what you want
 - I won't take a penny less than \$250,000 for this house
- Interest – A way to get what you really need
 - I owe \$250,000, but every month that I don't sell I lose money

How do you get to interests?

- Ask powerful, open-ended questions
- Remember that listening is a choice, not a skill

Interest Clarifying Technique (Adapted from Ursiny, pg. 139)

- “I really want to understand what it is that you want. I hear you saying that you want _____ is that correct?”
- Let them clarify
- “I’m wondering if we can be creative about figuring this out. Would you mind telling me what is driving your want for _____? In other words, why do you want it?” (Tone needs to be non-judgmental.)
- Listen...REALLY listen.
- “Is there something driving that want? What will having what you want do for you?”
- “And what would having that do for you?”
- Repeat this line of questioning until it seems like you have gotten down to a core interest. (This may be a moment of revelation for both of you.)
- Reflect back your perception of their core interest.
- Creatively problem-solve how to get this interest met while meeting your own.

Communicate

Make a decision on how you’d like to communicate and then do it.

Generate a variety of options

- Use what you’ve learned about their real interest to broaden the discussion
- Remember that you are looking for a joint solution

Insist that the agreement be based on objective criteria

- You can only negotiate two things:
 - Future behavior...I will...you will...
 - Anything with a number...dollars, hours, beads, etc., etc., etc.
- Never yield to pressure, only principle

Handy Communication Skills

- Common Communication Crack-Ups
 - Defensiveness (Reacting)
 - Forgetting that understanding is not the same as agreeing
 - Mismatching your verbal and non-verbal behaviors
- Positive Communication Tips
 - Speak the truth of your experience
 - Honesty in the content, empathy in the delivery
 - Choose your words carefully

Conclusion/Review

- The key component of conflict is relationships.
- Conflict can be positive or negative.
- The difference is found in the choices you make in conflict.
- While various models exist, the key to a positive solution is to choose to resolve the conflict.
- Listening and understanding are the useful, positive choices and you can learn techniques to assist you in making these choices.
- Acknowledge and accept the situations in which you find yourself and you will be the one in control.

Recommended Reading

Crum, Thomas. The Magic of Conflict. New York, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.

Fisher, Roger, and William Ury. Getting to Yes. 2nd ed. New York, New York: Penguin, 1991.

Horn, Sam. Tongue Fu!. New York, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996.

Lulofs, Roxane, and Dudley Cahn. Conflict: From Theory to Action. 2nd ed. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2000.

Ursiny, Tim. The Coward's Guide to Conflict. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2003.