

Resolving Interpersonal Conflict

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Introduction:

Interpersonal conflict is a situation in which one or both persons in a relationship are experiencing difficulty in working or living with each other. This usually occurs due to different or incompatible needs, goals or styles. The existence of conflict is usually signaled by negative feelings such as hurt, anger, confusion, etc. At this point, each person makes a decision whether to confront the conflict openly and directly or to ignore it, suppress it, or withdraw from the situation. The decision to confront the conflict assumes that the potential benefits of confronting outweigh the possible costs, and that confrontation is appropriate to the situation and the relationship.

The productive resolution of conflict usually strengthens relationships, whereas destructive confrontation, e.g., blaming, name calling, usually destroys relationships, or at the very least, detracts from their satisfaction and usefulness. Thus, it is very important how you confront the conflict once you have decided to do so. By following a sequence of steps and using communication and problem solving skills, you can increase the chances that the conflict will be resolved productively. This paper outlines the steps involved and gives guidelines for instituting them.

Contracting:

It is important that both parties agree to talk directly about the difficulty between them. One party initiates by stating the difficulty as s/he perceives it, and requesting that they find a mutually acceptable time and place to talk about it. The other party may accept the offer and negotiate the time and place, or may reject the offer. In the latter case, this avoidance may now become the prominent issue in the conflict.

Example:

Initiator: “John, I’m concerned about the argument we had in the meeting yesterday; and would like to get together to talk about it. How about tomorrow afternoon after coffee?”

Receiver: "I didn't really see a problem in the meeting, Reg, but I'd be happy to talk to you about it. Let's get together in the conference room at 3:30 tomorrow then, ok?"

In negotiating the time and place of the confrontation, it is important to choose a time when each person will feel ready and prepared to discuss the conflict, and to choose a setting that is relatively neutral and free from distractions. In the example, the conference room is not the "home ground" of either party. In the example, the receiver does not initially perceive a problem, but does acknowledge its existence for the other person and therefore the necessity of talking about it. If another person is unwilling to talk about difficulties in the relationship, that then becomes the focus of the contracting. If contracting on this basis is not possible, one or both parties may begin to question the utility and viability of the relationship.

Example:

Initiator: "John, in the meeting on Tuesday, there were several times when I put forward my ideas and you came in with your point before I had finished. I was really frustrated at not getting my input in, and that's part of the reason I took issue with your comments. By the end of the meeting was just boiling."

Receiver: "Geez, Reg, it sounds like I interrupted you repeatedly and you got very angry."

The receiver may also directly give his/her feeling reactions to the initiator's statements, and if these indicate motivation to further understand the conflict, the parties move to mutual diagnosis. Often of course, the receiver will become defensive and attempt to explain, justify or deny his/her behavior. If so, the initiator should work hard as an active listener.

The roles of speaker and listener should switch back and forth as necessary. Listening is often reciprocated, if the initiator is patient.

Problem Definition and Diagnosis:

It is essential that the parties gain a clear understanding of the conflict before they move on to suggesting solutions or requesting changes from each other. The use of interpersonal communication skills is necessary in order to clearly describe the behaviors that are part of the conflict and the negative feelings that relate to them. A clear and concrete definition of the problem is a prerequisite to clear and concrete solutions. The initiator presents his/her perceptions and feelings using behavior description and description of feelings. The receiver uses the skills of paraphrasing and empathy to gain an adequate understanding of how the initiator is experiencing the conflict. Both parties must refrain from accusing, name calling, ridiculing, sarcasm, etc., which will only escalate the conflict further, or shut down the discussion.

Example:

Receiver: "I'm surprised I didn't let you finish. I wasn't aware of that, and I'm not happy

with the result.”

Initiator: “Sounds like you weren’t aware of your coming in too soon, John. I want you to understand that I get pretty up-tight in those meetings with upper management, and am not very confident when I say something, so your interrupting really hits me hard. Then I start rejecting your ideas, whether they’re good or not.”

Receiver: “Ya, I can see you being more angry at being cut off than I would be. For me in the meetings, I get so involved in the discussion I forget sometimes whether you or someone else is talking or not, and I argue very strongly for my position.”

The clarification and elaborating process should continue until both persons have a clear understanding of the behaviors and feelings that are part of the conflict. Understanding “where the other person is coming from” (their perceptions, motives, values) is also essential for moving toward solutions.

Problem Solving:

Often, problem definition and diagnosis are adequate for the resolution of the conflict, i.e., the solution is obvious and the parties agree to monitor and change their problematic behavior. In the example above, John might agree to listen more carefully and be more sensitive to when Reg is finished speaking before making his own points. However, if the problem defined is of mutual concern and is not resolved by initial clarification, the parties can engage in a systematic problem solving process to arrive at resolution. Here are some suggestions.

Brainstorm alternative solutions without evaluation. Any behaviors, agreements, etc., that might contribute to conflict resolution should be included.

Evaluate, integrate, elaborate and/or delete alternative solutions by mutual consensus.

Use force-field analysis to evaluate the difficulty of putting alternative solutions into practice, that is, list forces for the solution and forces against the solution and discuss how the former can be increased and the latter decreased.

Choose a solution and decide on a mutually agreeable plan of action to implement it.

Evaluate the solution after a trial period and make modifications if desirable, to make the solution more permanent, or try another solution if necessary.

Closure:

Each person should describe what they understand the solution to be and indicated their agreement with it. The parties must be particularly clear on what behaviors, attitudes, etc., on their part will contribute to the solution, and both should indicate their commitment to these behaviors. The parties may also wish to explore whether there are any conflicts in their relationship that they want to confront. It is also useful to talk about the conflict resolution process that they have just been through, and commit to using the approach to prevent future

conflicts from occurring and/or escalating.

Example:

Initiator: “John, I wonder if it would help in the meetings if I let you know when you have interrupted me?”

Receiver: “Ya, it would help me Reg. Then I’d back off and let you finish. Also I’m going to use paraphrasing more, so I have a better idea what you’re saying before I give my suggestions. I don’t want problems like this to mess up our work relationship.”

Initiator: “I’m pleased we got together, John. I understand now what happened between us and I’m confident we’ll do better.”

Conclusion:

Resolving interpersonal conflict is hard work. It requires skill, self-awareness, courage, compassion and patience. Confronting differences tests the true quality of our relationships and further develops interdependence and mutuality.

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