

Conflict Resolution

A collection of borrowed ideas.

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What is Conflict

“I think it is important that people see that spirituality is at the base of Nonviolent Communication, and that they learn the mechanics of the process with that in mind. It’s really a spiritual practice that I am trying to show as a way of life. Even though we don’t mention this, people get seduced by the practice. Even if they practice this as a mechanical technique, they start to experience things between themselves and other people they weren’t able to experience before. So eventually they come to the spirituality of the process. They begin to see that it’s more than a communication process and realize it’s really an attempt to manifest a certain spirituality.”

– Marshall Rosenberg

Conflict seems to be a fact of life. We all experience situations in which people with differing needs and goals clash. We’ve all seen the animosity that can result. As Steiner often pointed out, the existence of conflict is not bad. When resolved effectively, it leads to deeper understanding and growth. By resolving conflict successfully, we can solve unacknowledged issues that are brought to the surface. Besides the obvious ending of a conflict, other benefits of conflict resolution are:

Increased understanding: The discussion needed to resolve a conflict expands our awareness of the situation, giving us insight into how we can achieve their own goals without undermining those of others.

Increased group cohesion: When conflict is resolved effectively, people develop stronger mutual respect and trust, and a deeper faith in their ability to work together.

Improved self-knowledge: Conflict challenges us to examine our goals and actions, helps us understand what is most important to us, and leads to deeper self-awareness.

If conflict is not handled effectively, the results can be damaging. Conflicting goals can quickly turn into personal dislike. Groups break down. Talent is wasted as people emotionally disengage from their duties. It’s easy to end up in a vicious downward spiral of negativity and recrimination.

Conflict Styles

Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann identified five styles for dealing with conflict that vary in the degrees of cooperativeness and assertiveness. Each person typically has a preferred—or default—style. They also noted that different styles were most useful in different situations. They developed the *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI)* which helps people identify the style they tend to prefer when conflict arises.

What is Conflict

Ideally, we adopt the approach that best meets the situation, resolves the conflict, respects everyone's legitimate needs and interests, and mends damaged relationships. Those who understand the different styles, can choose the most appropriate approach (or mixture of approaches) for each situation. They can also consider their own instinctive approach, and learn to alter it as needed. Such people are most successful at dealing with a wide range of conflicts.

Thomas and Kilmann's styles

Competitive: People who tend towards a competitive style take a firm stand, and know what they want. They usually operate from a position of power, drawn from things like position, rank, expertise, or persuasive ability. When used in less than urgent situations, this style can leave others feeling bruised, unsatisfied and resentful. Competition may be appropriate when:

- there is an emergency and a decision needs to be made fast
- the decision is unpopular
- defending against someone who is trying to selfishly exploit the situation

Collaborative: People tending towards a collaborative style try to meet everyone's needs. These people can be highly assertive but unlike the competitor, they cooperate effectively and acknowledge that everyone is important. Collaboration may be appropriate when:

- bringing a variety of viewpoints together to find the best solution,
- there have been previous conflicts in the group, or
- when the situation is too important for a simple trade-off.

Compromising: People who prefer a compromising style try to find a solution that will at least partially satisfy everyone. Everyone is expected to give up something, including the compromiser. Compromise may be appropriate when:

- the cost of conflict is higher than the cost of losing ground,
- equal strength opponents are at a standstill, or
- there is a deadline looming.

Accommodating: This style indicates a willingness to meet the needs of others at the expense of one's own needs. The accommodator can be persuaded to surrender a position even when it is not warranted. This person is not assertive and is highly cooperative. In general, this approach is unlikely to lead to the best outcomes. Accommodation may be appropriate when:

- the issues matter more to the other party,
- peace is more valuable than winning, or
- a person wants to be in a position to collect on a "favor."

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Avoiding: People tending towards this style seek to evade the conflict entirely. This style is typified by delegating controversial decisions, accepting default decisions, and not wanting to hurt anyone's feelings. In many situations this is a weak, ineffective and self-defeating approach. Avoiding can be appropriate when:

- victory is impossible,
- the controversy is trivial, or
- someone else is in a better position to solve the problem.

The "Interest-Based Relational Approach"

Another theory is commonly referred to as the *Interest-Based Relational (IBR) Approach*. This type of conflict resolution respects individual differences while helping people to avoid becoming overly entrenched in a fixed position. By following these rules, you can often keep contentious discussions positive and constructive. This helps to prevent the antagonism and dislike which so-often causes conflict to spin out of control. In resolving conflict using this approach, people follow these rules:

Good relationships are the first priority: As far as possible, ensure that all are treated calmly and mutual respect is built. Be courteous to one-another and remain constructive under pressure.

Keep people and problems separate: Recognize that in many cases the other person is not just "being difficult." Real and valid differences can lie behind conflicting positions. By separating the problem from the person, real issues can be debated without damaging personal relationships.

Pay attention to the interests that are being presented: Listen carefully to understand why other are adopting their position.

Listen first; talk second: Understand other perspectives before defending your own.

Set out the "facts": Agree to objective, observable facts that will have an impact on the decision.

Explore options together: Be open to the idea that an alternative perspective or solution may exist that no one has considered yet. Practice the courage to believe that you will get there together.

Carl Rogers' Nineteen Propositions

1. All individuals (organisms) exist in a continually changing world of experience (phenomenal field) of which they are the center.
2. The organism reacts to the field as it is experienced and perceived. This perceptual field is "reality" for the individual.

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3. The organism reacts as an organized whole to this phenomenal field.
4. A portion of the total perceptual field gradually becomes differentiated as the self.
5. As a result of interaction with the environment, and particularly as a result of evaluational interaction with others, the structure of the self is formed - an organized, fluid but consistent conceptual pattern of perceptions of characteristics and relationships of the "I" or the "me", together with values attached to these concepts.
6. The organism has one basic tendency and striving - to actualize, maintain and enhance the experiencing organism.
7. The best vantage point for understanding behavior is from the internal frame of reference of the individual.
8. Behavior is basically the goal-directed attempt of the organism to satisfy its needs as experienced, in the field as perceived.
9. Emotion accompanies, and in general facilitates, such goal directed behavior, the kind of emotion being related to the perceived significance of the behavior for the maintenance and enhancement of the organism.
10. The values attached to experiences, and the values that are a part of the self-structure, in some instances, are values experienced directly by the organism, and in some instances are values introjected or taken over from others, but perceived in distorted fashion, as if they had been experienced directly.
11. As experiences occur in the life of the individual, they are either, a) symbolized, perceived and organized into some relation to the self, b) ignored because there is no perceived relationship to the self structure, c) denied symbolization or given distorted symbolization because the experience is inconsistent with the structure of the self.
12. Most of the ways of behaving that are adopted by the organism are those that are consistent with the concept of self.
13. In some instances, behavior may be brought about by organic experiences and needs which have not been symbolized. Such behavior may be inconsistent with the structure of the self but in such instances the behavior is not "owned" by the individual.
14. Psychological adjustment exists when the concept of the self is such that all the sensory and visceral experiences of the organism are, or may be, assimilated on a symbolic level into a consistent relationship with the concept of self.
15. Psychological maladjustment exists when the organism denies awareness of significant sensory and visceral experiences, which consequently are not symbolized and organized into the gestalt of the self structure. When this situation exists, there is a basic or potential psychological tension.
16. Any experience which is inconsistent with the organization of the structure of the self may be perceived as a threat, and the more of these perceptions there are, the more rigidly the self structure is organized to maintain itself.

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17. Under certain conditions, involving primarily complete absence of threat to the self structure, experiences which are inconsistent with it may be perceived and examined, and the structure of self revised to assimilate and include such experiences.
18. When the individual perceives and accepts into one consistent and integrated system all his sensory and visceral experiences, then he is necessarily more understanding of others and is more accepting of others as separate individuals.
19. As the individual perceives and accepts into his self structure more of his organic experiences, he finds that he is replacing his present value system - based extensively on introjections which have been distortedly symbolized - with a continuing organismic valuing process.

The Conflict Resolution Process

Guiding Principles

1. Be Kind
2. Be Calm
3. Be Patient
4. Be Respectful

Overview of the Process

1. Agree to use conflict resolution
2. Choose a mediator
3. Schedule a meeting
4. Meet
5. Check-in

Participant Agreements

For conflict resolution to be successful, the following agreements should be accepted by all parties:

1. 100% confidentiality.
2. Commit to the process.
3. Don't interrupt, name call or label.
4. Clarify feelings.
5. Listen with empathy and see the conflict from the other's point of view.
6. Use "I" statements, rather than "You" statements.
7. Identify issues clearly and concisely.
8. Remain flexible.
9. Seek a win-win solution.

The Conflict Resolution Process

Roles

Participants: The primary responsibilities of participants are to listen carefully, speak honestly, and seek a complete and fair solution.

Mediator: The mediator's primary responsibility is to keep the process on track, and help participants remember the guidelines and agreements. Mediators must remember that they are not there to "fix" anything. They should never take sides or suggest a solution. The mediator acts as a neutral observer whose only purpose is to help the participants find *their own* solution. This role requires tact and humility.

Note: Many who run into conflict practice elements of conflict resolution without the need for a mediator. In fact most of us practice some form of conflict resolution each day. When conflicts are intense, or participants are unfamiliar with the conflict resolution process a mediator can be helpful, but it is important for all to understand that the solution must come from the participants, not the mediator.

A Step-by-Step Process

Set the stage

1. Mediator recalls the purpose for the meeting, reviews the guidelines and process, and encourages right attitude.
2. Share perspectives
 - a) The mediator reviews the guidelines for sharing perspectives, emphasizing that each person is simply presenting their perception of the conflict. Complete agreement over the facts is neither expected nor required.
 - b) The first participant explains what they believe happened, focusing on facts not feelings. During this time, the second participant does not interrupt, but listens carefully until the first person is finished speaking. The second participant then reflects back what they heard, restating it in their own words as fairly and honestly as they can. There is no need for the second person to agree; they are simply restating and reflecting back. The process continues until the first person feels that all relevant facts have been shared and understood.
 - c) The above step is repeated with roles reversed.
 - d) The process continues until all participants feel they have been fairly understood. When all are ready, the mediator suggests moving on to the next phase.

Share feelings

1. The mediator reviews the guidelines for sharing feelings, emphasizing the need for empathic listening.
2. The first participant now explains how the events made them feel. It is critical at this stage to focus on “I” statements. The second participant does not interrupt, but listens carefully until the first person is finished speaking. The second participant then reflects back what they heard, restating it in their own words as fairly and honestly as they can. There is no need for the second person to agree; they are simply restating and reflecting back. The process continues until the first person feels that all relevant facts have been shared and understood.
3. The above step is repeated with roles reversed.
4. In many cases, this honest and courageous sharing of perspectives and feelings is enough to clear up misunderstandings and lead to an obvious solution. If no
5. The process continues until all participants feel they have been fairly understood. When all are ready, the mediator suggests moving on to the next phase.

The Conflict Resolution Process

Seek solutions

1. Brainstorm ideas for solutions. Be open to new ideas. By this stage, the conflict may be resolved. Both sides may have a better understanding of the other, and a mutually satisfactory solution may be clear to all. Sometimes the search for a solution brings out new, unresolved aspects of the conflict. If this occurs, the mediator may suggest returning to earlier steps in the process to further clarify perspectives and feelings. On the other hand, real and unresolvable differences may have been uncovered. This is where a technique like win-win negotiation can be used to arrive at a workable solution—one that at least to some extent satisfies everyone.
2. If a solution is proposed, the participants discuss it and work out the details. The guidelines continue to be followed, such as not interrupting, listening empathetically, etc.
 - a) It is essential that participants develop their own solution. Participant commitment to the process can be seriously weakened if they do not feel the solution was of their own creation.
 - b) A solution should never be suggested or imposed by others. A reasonable solution may appear obvious to the mediator, but they must resist proposing it. High humility is required; no one outside the conflict can understand the unspoken complexities of such situations.
3. Ultimately a solution that is agreeable to all parties may be found. When this happens, details of the solution are worked out, a check-in meeting is scheduled and the meeting is concluded.
4. If no solution can be found, the mediator may offer to schedule another meeting to continue conflict resolution, or the participants may decide that conflict resolution will not work. If the participants make this decision, the mediator should accept it. It is *not* the mediator's responsibility to "fix" the problem.

Check-in

1. On the agreed to date—typically a few weeks later—the mediator and participants meet to review how things are going. If all participants feel that the solution worked well, the matter is closed and champagne is served.
2. If any of the participants feel the solution is not working well, the process may begin again, this time focusing on whatever outstanding issues the previous solution failed to resolve.