

Tips for Dealing with Conflict

None of us can escape conflict. Once we find ourselves in a conflict situation, whether it is in our business or professional lives, most of us tend to experience varying degrees of stress. Many of us want to reduce stress. By learning new skills and "self talk," you may be able to deal more effectively with conflict.

Learning these skills and practicing them requires practice. Most of our habits and behaviours take many years to learn, so change is not likely to occur overnight. Usually it takes time to become more self-aware and to find the motivation to change unwanted behaviours, beliefs, attitudes, and actions.

The purpose of this article is to provide you with a general overview of how to deal more effectively with conflict in your professional and personal lives. Hopefully, you will find a few useful tips here. Please note this article covers a few highlights of conflict resolution and is not intended to be comprehensive. Conflict resolution is a broad and complex topic and to learn more, you should check out the website of the Justice Institute of BC, Centre for Conflict Resolution at www.jibc.ca/cercl.

As you know, individuals are unique and will approach, react and deal with conflict in their own special way. Some individuals react calmly whereas others "fly off the handle" and others just let conflict roll off them like "water off a duck's feathers." If you are one of those folks whose blood pressure rises in a conflict situation, you are likely to want to learn how to manage conflict more effectively. Some general tips are:

- Try to be calm and not reactive. Your "hurt" feelings can influence how you present yourself and this may be negative.
- Place some distance between your feelings and the issue. Try to not get caught up in your emotion. Focus on the issue and the facts rather than on the other person.
- Look at the facts. Be aware of how your perceptions, feelings and judgments can cloud your perception of the real issue. Our perceptions are often influenced by factors such as our past, the environment and culture in which we live, your gender, age, etc.
- Try to depersonalize the conflict and not attach any blame.
- Do not try to steer the discussion to serve your interests. Be open-minded and willing to listen and learn.
- Manage your feelings, emotions, and keep your thoughts and words in check. Take a few deep breaths and allow yourself time to pause and think before responding.
- Practice or role-play your conflict scenario with a friend or colleague before the "real" situation. Role-playing allows you an opportunity to learn and to be better prepared.

When you find yourself in a conflict that you wish to resolve, it's always a good idea to set up a meeting with the other person(s). Meeting in person as opposed to using the phone or email to resolve conflict is preferable. Phone or email allows too much room for misinterpretation.

Agree on a date, time, the length of time required and a location that is convenient for both parties. As a courtesy, let the other person know in advance of the meeting what you plan to discuss. If the other person declines your invitation or refuses to acknowledge you (tempers could be high!), then distance yourself from this scenario for now and give them a "reasonable" length of time to get back to you. Conflict "avoiders" often need additional time to clearly digest information and prepare for the meeting.

Once the meeting takes place, you could try to diffuse some tension by making some "small talk." Using an "ice-breaker" to enquire about how their family is, any upcoming vacation plans or other light topic of discussion can help set the right tone. Some general tips for the initial meeting are:

- Identify the conflict.
- Acknowledge the situation or the other person's feelings by making a comment such as "I can see this is tough for you." Be empathetic.

- Clearly state your own point of view.
- Invite the other person to state their point of view.
- Keep checking with one another to make sure there is no misunderstanding of what is being said by making a comment such as, "I understand you to be saying is ..." or "What I hear you saying is ..." Use your own words to describe your understanding of what the other person has just said. Be careful to not repeat their words verbatim or you may annoy them further.
- Be hard on the issues and not hard on the person.
- Depersonalize the conflict and do not blame.

Conflict resolution requires good communications and listening skills. Verbal communications can lead to misunderstandings. For example, the same word can have different connotations depending upon the person's culture and background.

To minimize conflict, try to paraphrase what you understand the other person to be saying.

Throughout the discussion, be curious and ask questions. Curiosity will help you remain calm and focus on the issues and not your feelings. Ask open-ended questions using "how", "what", "when", and "where." Open-ended questions open up the dialogue and give both parties the information required to find common ground. Avoid using "why" as it can cause the other person to become defensive.

In addition, avoid asking close-ended questions that require just a "yes" or "no" response. Close-ended questions do not provide the other person with the opportunity to articulate what they have to say. Don't make the mistake of assuming that you know the answers to the questions before asking. Also, do not manipulate the situation by framing the question to get the answer that you want.

Listen attentively. Listening is a skillful art that requires much concentration. Listening is hard work! During the conversation, take moments to check in with the person speaking to paraphrase what you think they are saying.

Express yourself clearly. Be assertive rather than aggressive. For example, use "I" to express your feelings rather than using "you." Often when we use the word "you" it can lead to "finger pointing." Clearly state your needs and expectations. Work towards arriving at a mutually agreeable solution.

Keep a positive attitude and be future-focused. Don't dwell on the negatives of the past. Learn from past mistakes and keep moving forward.

Near the end of your discussion, summarize what is important to both parties. Once the facts are on the table, it will be easier to come up with a solution. You want a solution to the problem that is acceptable to both parties.

Finally, you want to come to a resolution or at least to a temporary end to the conversation without a resolution.

If you do come to a resolution, put the terms of your agreement in writing and have both parties sign it. A written agreement is not only helpful in both professional and personal relationships, it can serve as a good reminder for the future should a similar situation arise.

If you do not come to a resolution, you may want to look for ways to amend what has happened in the past and suggest new ideas to improve your relationship in the future; check to see if ideas work for both; and agree about who will do what. Continue to work with one another to create trust and minimize fear.