



Fire & EMS Leader Pro

Lead by Learning

Managing Conflict Successfully

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This publication describes the differences between conflict and disagreement, and provides procedures for resolving them successfully.

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How do you typically respond when you seriously disagree with someone? Do you...

- get mad inside but keep quiet and give the other person the "silent" treatment?
- withdraw to a safe distance because you don't like to argue?
- get angry, criticize, call names, use sarcasm or some other aggressive behavior?
- give in; say "I guess you are right" with a big sigh, be submissive in order to avoid conflict.
- deny or pretend that "everything is okay"--no conflict exists.

These are common, but usually unsuccessful, methods of coping with conflict between family members or friends, and in work settings.

Just because interpersonal conflict is common doesn't mean it has to be negative and destructive. We must understand when conflict occurs and avoid falling prey to some of its common myths and misconceptions.

Myths or Misconceptions about Conflict

- *Harmony is normal and conflict is abnormal.* **FALSE.** Conflict is natural, normal and inevitable whenever people interact together.
- *Conflict is the result of personality differences.* **FALSE.** Personalities do not conflict--it is people's behavior that conflicts. Too often we use "personality conflict" as an excuse to do nothing about the conflict.
- *Conflict and disagreement are the same.* **FALSE.** Disagreement is a difference of opinion while conflict is more threatening. Disagreement is usually restrained and fairly calm; conflict is often unreasoned and angry.

Why Does Conflict Occur?

Human behavior studies indicate that some conflict is inevitable in human relationships. Often clashes occur more over perceived differences than real ones. People anticipate blocks to achieving their goals that may or may not be there. Conflict occurs when:

1. There is a *lack of communications*. Failure to share ideas and feelings (between wife and husband for example) allows the other person to "fill in the gap." We "read in" what we think the other person will say or anticipate how the other person will respond. Then, we often suspect a negative thing which provokes anxiety, leading us to look for the worst. If this continues, trust becomes lower and we may become suspicious and defensive.
2. There is a value conflict in which two people have different attitudes, beliefs and expectations. These differences may interfere in making decisions if we are inflexible and hold rigid, dogmatic beliefs about the "right way" to do things. Different values and beliefs predispose two people to choose different goals or different methods to achieve the same goals. And, since each goal requires an investment of time, effort and some sacrifice, we cannot pursue one goal without sacrificing the other to some extent.
3. There is a lack of effective leadership or decision-making. Lack of agreement about "who's in charge" or "how we are going to get things done" in any situation can be a source of conflict. For example, if one parent in a family expects democratic decision-making (all members have input) and the other wants to be the boss (do it my way), they may not be able to resolve honest differences of opinion. Then when differences exist, they become sidetracked into a hassle over who will decide or whose opinion is going to be accepted as the "right" one. The resulting conflict becomes a "win-lose" struggle.

4. There are discrepancies in role performances. Difficulties can arise if two people see their own and each others roles differently. For example, if the wife's concept of her role and the husband's concept of her role are very different, conflict may arise. But, if the man's role as a male and husband meshes well with the woman's role as female and wife, conflict will be minimal.

5. There is low productivity. Being able to accomplish tasks and achieve goals is a necessary ingredient in any work or family environment. And, if the task is not done, we may get angry. If the other person responds to our anger by performing the task, a response pattern of anger is established in order to get results. Couples with low productivity in their marriage may try nagging, making trade-offs (I'll do this if you do that), and criticizing, but these tend to produce only short-term success.

6. Change causes disequilibrium. While change is considered to be a "given" for people working and living together, another "given" is that people prefer secure, predictable patterned responses to the unknown.

When changes occur abruptly and unpredictably, conflict may follow (e.g. The wife comes home from her college class one night and says "I want a divorce."). Forces may have been at work for a long time to cause such a change, but it appears suddenly and provokes anger, anxiety and confusion.

7. Unresolved prior conflict. As the number of past unresolved conflicts increases between people so does the possibility of future ones. Many people shy away from conflict management because memories of past conflicts still hurt. Probably the most lasting of those "scars" have been caused by conflicts with those we are closest to--family, close friends, trusted colleagues and in work groups.

Managing Interpersonal Conflicts

Before we try to work through a conflict with another person to achieve a more constructive outcome, there are five questions we must ask ourselves.

1. Is the conflict issue really worth the effort to resolve it?
2. Is the other person in the conflict really important to me?
3. Will talking about the issue really improve our relationship?
4. Am I willing to spend the necessary time and energy talking about the issue and helping the other person by listening?
5. Have I chosen an appropriate time and place for this confrontation?

If the answer to each of these questions is **YES**, then proceed. If some answers are **NO**, you may need to choose a different method of expressing your concerns (e.g. sharing feelings only, without problem-solving).

Strategies for Dealing with Disagreement and Conflict

Disagreement by itself is usually not the cause of antagonism, hostility and conflict. More often, *failure to listen and allow alternative views to be heard* causes these feelings. There are five broad strategies people usually use in dealing with disagreement and conflict--*power, compromise, withdraw-avoid, placate-yield, and synergy*.

- **"I win, You lose"**

This process involves resolution through using *power* and winning by force or coercion. It may take the form of "pulling rank," brow-beating, or simply outmaneuvering the opposition. The distinguishing feature of the power strategy is that resolution of the problem is unrelated to the relative merits of arguments (e.g. "You will do what I say because I'm your father and no questions asked!").

If you prefer this style as your dominant strategy, you typically view conflict as having two possible outcomes--winning or losing. If you win, your self-esteem or competence is enhanced. If you lose or are "wrong," this is a loss of status--you are incompetent or weak. The result is an aggressive, dogmatic, inflexible and unreasonable approach to conflict management; one in which the goal is to overcome your adversary. Some families and work places use this style.

- **"I win (a little), You win (a little)"**

Compromise is a negotiated resolution based on each person making some concessions to the other (e.g. "If you will give..., I will give..."). Within this style, however, the other person may still be seen as an opponent. Compromise is often seen as a means for making the solution more tolerable to each party. It is a persuasive and often manipulative conflict management style in which both ends are frequently played against the middle in an attempt to serve the "common good" (e.g. Let's all give a little for the "good of the club"). On what issues are you willing to compromise?

- **"I lose, You lose"**

Hopelessness is the central feature of this withdrawal and avoidance strategy. It is designed to protect you from being caught up in endless struggles that cannot be won. An expectation of "losing" characterizes this style and, rather than undergo such frustration, you will psychologically, and perhaps physically, leave the conflict. It is a refuge for persons who have unsuccessfully tried other styles and have decided to "roll with the punches." ("Those who quit and run away will live to fight another day.")

But, this strategy often results in compliance without commitment and feelings of frustration and resentment.

- **"I lose (a little), You win (a little)"**

This *placate-yield* style reflects a concern for the effect of conflict on the well-being and durability of all relationships you enter. The assumption is that human relationships are so fragile they cannot endure the trauma of working through genuine differences. So the tendency is to avoid conflict and appease others by ignoring, denying and avoiding conflict.

Should differences persist, giving in, placating and submitting yourself to another's goals (It's OK, you're right, we'll do it your way...") are seen as effective ways of self-protection and protecting your relationships with others. One-sided domination in the relationship is the likely outcome of this strategy.

- **"I win, You win"**

As a dominant style for conflict management, this *synergistic* approach attaches major importance to both the goals of the parties involved and to the well-being of the relationships. This is a "win-win" outcome and assumes that you and others will enthusiastically cooperate since the positive total effect is greater than what could be achieved by individual efforts. (e.g. If all of our family members will pull together, we can achieve our goals; if not, we may all be dissatisfied.)

Tolerance for differences and recognition of the legitimacy of feelings are central to this strategy. Each individual must agree to abide by the rules of negotiation and agree to solve the conflict constructively. Any "hidden agendas" are brought out in the open so they may be effectively dealt with.

Rules for Having a "Creative" Conflict

A *rule* refers to any practice or pattern of behavior that guides other processes, such as conflict resolution. In any marriage, family or work environment, there is occasionally a struggle over rules--who sets them, the kinds of rules that exist and what happens when rules are broken.

Here are some suggested guidelines that all parties must agree to in order for the creative conflict management process to proceed. If they don't, the process will quickly deteriorate as people try to "win" as much as possible and "lose" as little as possible.

1. Agree that now is a good time to attempt to resolve the conflict. Allow "prime time" when energy is high and motivation is positive, not when you are angry or tired.
2. The goal of creative conflict is deeper understanding, not "I win, you lose." There must be an underlying attitude of respect, caring, forgiveness and no harm.
3. Check weapons to be sure they are not deadly (no threat, no harm). Do not use an "atomic bomb" when a "squirt gun" will do.
4. Discuss the specific issue or specific *behavior*, not the person, personality or motivation.
5. Stay in the *present*, do not engage in coercion or fault-finding from the past.
6. Provide "face-saving" mechanisms. Don't corner the other person. Allow a "time out" if emotion gets too heavy. Then set a time to resume again. An armistice is not surrender.
7. When you have come to terms, put the disagreement away until you agree that it needs more discussion.

Now that you have agreed upon rules about how to resolve a conflict, the following are some guidelines for negotiating that consider both the relationship and the issue at stake.

Rules for Negotiating a Conflict Issue

1. You may request a change if something is done that displeases you, or not done, which disappoints you.
2. You can request a change in an aspect of the other's behavior that has prevented you from effective problem discussion or negotiation in the past.

3. A good request is one that has taken into consideration the positive consequences on your relationship.
4. A good request for change is one that is accompanied with an *offer*. You can request for a change in the other's behavior if you are willing to *provide support* for the desired change, or reward it with a change important to the other.
5. No request can be turned down unless a *negotiable alternative* is available. If you suggest alternatives or make a counter-request, try to make an offer at the same time.
6. Do not agree to a settlement that you have reservations about, or are not willing to comply with. Perhaps you could have a tentative agreement--both try something for a week or a month to see what impact that solution may have.

Resolving a Disagreement

The following exercise is designed to help *two individuals* resolve a particular disagreement or conflict. In order for this to work, both individuals must want to have some sort of resolution to the situation. The process goes as follows:

1. Person A completes the sequence of four statements (as follows) from his/her point of view. Person A should be very specific and focus on behaviors. Remember, the goal is mutual resolution, not winning.
 - a. Description of the *current* situation ("The conflict I'm having with you is..." "The problem as I see it is...").
 - b. Description of the *ideal* situation ("What I'd like to see is..." "What I'd like the outcome to be is...").
 - c. Description of *current* feelings or emotions ("The way I feel about this situation is..." "I feel.. when we...because...").
 - d. Description of *self-intention* ("What I'm willing to do to create what I want is..." "I'm willing to reach a settlement by...").

2. Person B then paraphrases what Person A has said. If the paraphrase is accepted as accurate by Person A, Person B goes through the same sequence of statements and Person A paraphrases them.
3. Person A then asks, "Can we reach an agreement?" If the answer is "no," Person A begins the sequence again. If the answer is "yes," both parties propose possible solutions.
4. Person A presents four possible solutions, considering what Person B has said, ranking them 1, 2, 3, 4. Person B does the same. Person A selects one of B's solutions and Person B selects one of A's solutions as being the most desirable. Negotiate over which solution will accomplish the greatest outcome for both. Agree to try it out in a temporary basis to assess its consequences. Then come back and make any small changes as necessary. Any resolution must be tried willingly by both parties. A lack of commitment to do so may shatter the outcome and lower the trust level.

NOTE: It may be helpful to have a third person present to facilitate the statement sequence and paraphrasing process.

Working Through a Conflict Situation

This exercise is designed to help one person examine and work through, in writing, a particular disagreement or conflict with another.

A. Describe the *current* situation. ("The problem is -
_____".)

Party I (self) would probably say the key issue is
_____.

Party II (the other) would probably say the key issue is
_____.

- B. Describe the ideal situation. ("What I'd like to see _____.")
- C. Party I wants _____.
- D. Party II wants _____.
- E. What has Party I or Party II done that has moved the conflict toward either a desirable or undesirable outcome?
- F. Party I did _____.
- G. Party II did _____.
- H. Outcomes likely if conflict is worked out _____.
- I. Outcomes likely if conflict is not worked out _____.
- J. Intention and behavior. ("What I'm willing to do _____.")
- K. Party I intends to (will do) _____.
- L. Party II intends to (will do) _____.
- M. What is preventing resolution at this time?
_____.

Summary

The potential for conflict exists whenever and wherever people have contact. It basically involves one or more of the following: 1) threats; 2) incompatible interests or goals; or 3) incomplete understanding or hidden personal feelings. In creative management of conflict all parties need to:

- Recognize and acknowledge that it exists.
- Facilitate open, accurate communication and active listening.
- Maintain an objective, not emotional stance--stay on the issues, not people.
- Negotiation is a cooperative enterprise, common interests must be sought in which everybody wins something.

- Make the necessary adjustments, reinforce, confirm, and make the agreement work.

Remember the words of Robert Townsend: "A good manager does not try to eliminate conflict; he tries to keep it from wasting the energies of his people." All conflict cannot be resolved. Sometimes individuals do not think it is in their best interest--the price is too high. Resolution means negotiation toward a creative solution--if one party is unwilling to do that, the conflict will continue.

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Chief Avsec had the privilege of serving with the outstanding men and women of the Chesterfield (VA) Fire & EMS (CFEMS) Department for 26 years. His career as a fire officer is somewhat unique in that he spent a cumulative total of 9+ years in staff officer positions as: Director of EMS Division; Co-Manager of Emergency Communications Center (911); and Director of Training & Safety Division. Chief Avsec also served multiple tours of duty in the department's Emergency Operations Division.

His post-retirement career has included: operational and planning consultant working with a private sector EMS agency; staff instructor and course developer with the Georgia Fire Academy; and private sector consulting with Department of Defense and federal agencies that included the U.S. Army's Installation Management Command, Fire & Emergency Services Branch.

Chief Avsec has developed quite a sense for several areas in the "management sciences" that include:

- Strategic planning and organization development for emergency services agencies;
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Chief Avsec earned a Master's Degree in *Executive Fire Service Leadership* from Grand Canyon University in Phoenix, Arizona, and a Bachelor of Science degree in *Fire and Safety Engineering Technology* from the University of Cincinnati. He's also a graduate of the National Fire Academy's *Executive Fire Officer Program*.

Learn more about Chief Avsec by viewing his professional profile on [LinkedIn](#)