

Conflict Resolution

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Someone once said that Americans hate conflict and love violence. Perhaps if we had more of the former, we'd have less of the latter. Conflict is often seen as negative because it makes people uncomfortable but without conflict there would be no change and growth. In other words, psychological pain or discomfort can have positive outcomes. There are several aspects to conflict resolution that have been articulated by groups like Educators for Social Responsibility and authors like Fisher and Ury who wrote *Getting to yes*. These include conflict styles, communication blockers and active listening. There are three conflict styles.

The first is avoidance where a person refuses to acknowledge that conflict exists and withholds her feelings. This person is overly accommodating and would walk a mile to avoid an argument. This is the passive person who goes along to get along, suppresses her feelings and is resentful of being a doormat for others. At some point this person could explode and unleash a great deal of fury. This is the easiest because it involves giving in and getting temporary peace but it may also postpone the resolution of problems that may come up again and again. This is also useful when the relationship means more than the issue at hand so that some particular issue is not worth fighting over or if there needs to be some temporary cooling off before the problem can be dealt with rationally. No one may be happy with this lose-lose or lose-win situation even the winner because he may have wanted to get at the heart of the issue in order to prevent its reoccurrence. If problems do not get closure, they never go away.

The second conflict style is confrontation whereby a person butts heads with others, yells and screams or is verbally or physically abusive. This person tries to dominate and control, defend his position at all costs and hide his feelings. This is the aggressive person who expresses his needs at the expense of others, is hostile, manipulative and overpowering and not willing to compromise or negotiate. This approach may be useful when safety is a concern but it also intimidates people, is undemocratic and incites rebellion. It has a win-lose outcome and the loser may be seething on the inside.

The third style is problem solving whereby the person uses compromise (but not on everything), communication skills and collaboration. This is the assertive person who expresses her feelings without violating others' rights and is emotionally honest and self-confident. This is good for creating win-win situations where everyone feels he has had his needs met. It improves relations between disputants and opposing points are understood by all. This takes the longest time to work with and all parties must want a mutually beneficial or win-win outcome.

Conflict also has two escalators. One increases conflict and the other decreases it. On the up escalator, each behavior can aggravate the situation making it more difficult to step back. Every step has feelings that go with it that also escalate. People rarely get on the escalator with baggage that further serves to fuel the conflict. This baggage can include prior experiences with the person, current feelings about the person, past experiences and current feelings about conflict, feelings about oneself, mood that day and

more. The higher you go up, the harder it is to come down. It takes two to fight and if one leaves the area, then a cooling off period is possible. The down escalator uses the acronym CAPS. C stands for Cool Off whereby a person can take deep breaths, relax his muscles, talk to himself, count backwards and/or leave momentarily. A means Agree to Work it Out by not taking the next step up and showing a willingness to talk it out after tempers have cooled. P means Point of View where each person gives her point of view while the other not only listens but also restates the other person's point of view to determine accuracy. In this position, people use "I" messages that stress how the person himself feels rather than accusatory "you" messages about the other person. Active listening is also used whereby the person is encouraging, asks clarifying questions, restates and repeats what the other person is saying, reflects the other person's feelings, summarizes in search of accuracy and validates the other person's concerns and needs. The S stands for Solve the Problem through brainstorming solutions and making a plan that may later need to be renegotiated.

Communication is a very important part of peaceful conflict resolution because the biggest problem with runaway conflict is communication blockers that consist of interrupting, ignoring, sarcasm, insults and name calling, globalizing, judging, blaming and stating opinion as fact.

The problem solving approaches used to successfully resolve conflicts may differ in some ways but they all have some things in common. The first is to find a good time and place to talk. The second is to clearly identify the problem or issue by having people express their views without interruption. The third is to brainstorm solutions and not judge any until all are on the table. The fourth is to choose a solution and agree to it. The fifth is to implement it, and the sixth is to evaluate it and modify it if needed.

If more people used the concepts, principles and actions described here we would not have to do away with conflict but we could resolve it with more light than heat. It would be a win-win situation for everyone.