

The Principles of Conflict Resolution

1. Think Before Reacting

The tendency in a conflict situation is to react immediately. After all, if we do not react, we may lose our opportunity. In order to resolve conflict successfully it is important to think before we react – consider the options, weigh the possibilities. The same reaction is not appropriate for every conflict.

2. Listen Actively

Listening is the most important part of communication. If we do not hear what the other parties are communicating, we cannot resolve a conflict. Active listening means not only listening to what another person is saying with words, but also to what is said by intonation and body language. The active listening process also involves letting the speaker know that he or she has been heard. For example, “What I heard you say is...”

3. Assure Fair Process

The process of resolving a conflict is often as critical as the conflict itself. It is important to assure that the resolution method chosen as well as the process for affecting that method is fair to all parties to the conflict. Even the perception of unfairness can destroy the resolution.

4. Attack the Problem

Conflict is very emotional. When emotions are high it is much easier to begin attacking the person on the other side than it is to resolve the problem. The only way conflicts get resolved is when we attack the problem and not each other. What is the problem that lies behind the emotion? What are the causes of the symptoms?

5. Accept Responsibility

Every conflict has many sides and there is enough responsibility for everyone. Attempting to place blame only creates resentment and anger that heightens any existing conflict. In order to resolve a conflict, we must accept our share of the responsibility and eliminate the concept of blame.

6. Use Direct Communication

Say what you mean and mean what you say. Avoid hiding the ball by talking around a problem. The best way to accomplish this is by using “I-messages”. With an “I-message” we express our own wants, needs or concerns to the listener. “I-messages” are a clear and non-threatening way of telling others what we want and how we feel. A “you-message” blames or criticizes the listener. It suggests that he or she is at fault.

7. Look for Interests

Positions are usually easy to understand because we are taught to verbalise what we want. However, if we are going to resolve conflict successfully, we must uncover why we want something and what is really important about the issue in conflict. Remember to look for the true interests of all the parties to the conflict.

8. Focus on the Future

In order to understand the conflict, it is important to understand the dynamics of the relationship, including the history of the relationship. However, in order to resolve the conflict, we must focus on the future. What do we want to do differently tomorrow?

9. Options for Mutual Gain

Look for ways to assure that we are all better off tomorrow than we are today. Our gain at the expense of someone else only prolongs conflict and prevents resolution.

These principles of conflict resolution were originally issued by the US Department of the Navy. They attempt to address the real needs of people involved in a conflict. They are based on the interest-based negotiation model of conflict resolution set out by Fischer and Ury, Getting to Yes (Second Edition 1996)