

Less Time, More Impact

Suggestions for Surviving in Organizations

Conflict . . . Not All Bad (Part 2 of 2)

In part one, we learned how conflict occurs (the conflict cycle) and why many of us feel uncomfortable with conflict. We also learned that conflict is normal and the end result can be positive. Let's now look at how each of us each typically handles conflict. As you read the following try to determine the category you usually fall into.

Aggressive/Oppositional

This is a method that uses direct tactics. There is a strong need to control situations and/or people. The style is directive and judgmental. The idea is to straighten out the other person, to argue about who is right, and to be ready to defend ideas forcibly.

Assertive/Persuasive

This position describes a readiness to defend a stand without being pushy. The willingness to work toward a solution by negotiating is the characteristic attitude. Verbal skills are used to bring the other party around.

Observant/Introspective

A process of observing others and examining oneself analytically in response to conflict situations is typical. Also common are a striving to understand, to listen and to put oneself in the other person's place. The mood is cooperative, even conciliatory.

Avoiding/Reactive

To be passive and withdrawing from conflict situations is the customary manner. Usually accepting and patient, often suppressing strong feelings to avoid confrontation, is the most frequent attitude.

None of these methods is always right or always wrong. The assertive/persuasive, and the observant/introspective are often most productive, especially when used in combination.

Aggressive behavior usually victimizes others and tends to make people uncooperative.

Avoidance behavior usually victimizes one's self and tends to make it difficult for others to know there is a problem.

Discovering our habits in reacting to conflict situations gives us information about how we affect others. Once we know what our style is, we can judge if it is useful or if another method might be more appropriate.

Learning new methods for resolving conflict gives us the possibility to choose the style best suited to each situation. By testing a variety of techniques we can be more selective in our behavior and become more effective. The changes we make in our own patterns will frequently produce corresponding changes in the responses of others.

While conflict may seem negative, it is actually a natural event in relationships between people. It can become a liability if it remains unresolved. Depending on how they are handled, conflicts may have negative or positive consequences. Let's compare the possible results of unsuccessful and successful (creative) conflict resolution.

Unsuccessful

People feel defeated and humiliated. The distance between the parties increases. A climate of distrust develops. Cooperation may decrease. Resistance develops when teamwork is needed. Some people leave because of the turmoil.

Successful

Better ideas are produced. People are challenged to search for new approaches. Long-standing problems surface and are addressed. People are forced to clarify their views. Tension stimulates interest and creativity. People have a chance to test their capabilities. In itself, conflict is neither good nor bad. It is what we do with it that makes the difference.

We can become more effective in conflict situations if we respond by consciously selecting our behavior, instead of merely reacting based on habitual, unexamined patterns.

To prepare us for managing conflict creatively, we need to become aware of the methods we choose in dealing with conflict situations and learn new ways that expand our ability to handle conflict and produce positive results.

If you would like to expand your background in this area the Oconto County UW-Extension Office has a series of cassette tapes entitled "Dealing With Difficult People". You can check out these resources.

RESOURCE:

Anderson, Carol; Hamann, Marjorie (1985). Tact in Action. Unpublished teaching guide. University of Wisconsin-Extension. Family Living Education, Madison.

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*An Oconto County University
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