



Seven Steps to Communicate through Conflict

by Alan Ovson

What happens to most of us when we are confronted with conflict? The first thing is we have an emotional reaction. When dealing with conflict, you may feel attacked, begin to question yourself, stop listening, and get defensive. Then, you may attack the other person, and the conflict escalates making both sides defensive. The conversation dies, nothing gets accomplished, and, worse, the situation festers.

Sound familiar? Want to move through conflict more easily? It's not that hard. It takes practice and knowledge of how to develop and deliver a clear, powerful message to the other person.

These seven steps will help you deliver that message.

#1: Identify the Goals You Want

In a conflict you'll often speak before you've thought of what you want. If you don't know what you're looking for when dealing with the conflict, you'll settle for less than what you truly desire or simply fight harder for a goal that you might not want. Knowing your goal first helps you communicate more clearly. As Stephen Covey said, "Begin with the end in mind."

#2: Choose the Best Time to Speak

When confronted with a difficult issue, you may feel attacked, get angry, and be on the defensive. None of these reactions will give you the best outcome. Instead of reacting, step back, take a deep breath, and evaluate the situation. If you know you can't think clearly, you can ask for a specific time to talk about the issue and then prepare yourself to be at your best.

#3: Rehearse the Statement

You need to think and be clear about what the real issue is first. You don't need to say anything when the conflict first arises. By taking the time to analyze the real issue that's causing the conflict, you can create a couple of alternatives to discuss. Then, before you talk again, rehearse what you'll say.

#4 Pinpoint the Specific Behavior or Issue You Want to Discuss

This is huge! The real issues are rarely emotional issues. You need to clarify what the real issue is before you can discuss it. When discussing the issue, be sure to talk about the behavior – not



about the person or about whether they're right or wrong. Put the focus on what happened (the action itself) and what needs to be done to correct the situation.

#5 Explain Your Reaction to the Behavior

We all have reactions when confronted with conflict, and we need to be as clear as possible in expressing what our feelings are. Clearly understanding your own emotions can move you past defensiveness and anger. Explain your feelings and stay away from what you think the other side's feelings are. If you are unclear, you can ask them how they felt about the situation. It is important for the other person to understand how you feel about the situation so you can both move past the feeling stage and on to the solution stage.

#6: Make a Request

This is another huge point. In order to get past the conflict, make a specific request describing what the other person can do to move through the conflict. This request has to contain a proposed solution to the conflict. Just by requesting something specific, it puts the ball back in the other person's court. You can request that the other person take a certain action or not do something that bothers you. By making a specific request, you are asking them to do something that will help both of you solve the conflict.

#7: Describe the Consequences

After you make your specific request, you need to clearly describe what will happen if your request is not granted. Describing these consequences lets the other person know that their current behavior may lead to a negative outcome. If there are no consequences attached to our request, it's unlikely that the other person will take the request seriously. More powerfully, if the other side hears what the consequences are if the request is not followed, they are forewarned that the conflict will not change.

Taken together, these seven strategies create a very powerful, personal way of taking charge of conflict situations. Instead of dealing only with our negative feelings, these strategies allow us to identify the specific conflict issue, deal with whatever feelings may be a barrier to resolving the conflict, create a pathway through the conflict, and reinforce our ability to move through conflict every time we encounter it. Moving through conflict without feeling bad, getting emotional, or becoming defensive is as easy as 1, 2, 3 . . . 4, 5, 6, and 7.

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