



How to Handle Conflict Productively

Differences of opinion are inevitable and sometimes, these differences can manifest themselves as conflict, which can be stressful for everyone involved. However, there are specific things that you can do to navigate conflict conversations in a healthier and ultimately more constructive manner. Here are some tips for you to consider:

A. What's the root cause of the conflict?

Sometimes, the issue at hand that seems to be causing the conflict is merely a symptom of a larger and more deep-rooted issue. Perhaps your boss suggests a new initiative that you're opposed to, but the underlying issue is that you constantly feel blind-sided by his ideas and resent not being consulted. Identifying the true issue will allow you to come up with a longer lasting and more effective solution, rather than constantly addressing symptoms of the problem. Protracted and/or intense conflicts are often symptomatic of something bigger going on.

B. Understand the other person's vision of success

One of the first things that we forget during a difficult conversation is the importance of empathy, which is all about understanding where the other person is coming from. In his seminal book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Dr. Stephen R. Covey writes: "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." This is very good advice and something you would be well served to do in your next difficult conversation. Try to determine what their vision of success looks like? What are they trying to achieve? Why is this important to them? Questions like this will spark your curiosity and will help you dig into their mindset and motivation, allowing you to create a more cooperative dynamic.

C. Allow the other person to be heard

Have you ever been in an argument that got so heated that you'd forgotten what you were arguing about, but you knew you had to win? We all have, and in those times, we rarely hear each other. Instead, we talk over each other. What social psychologists call the Law of Reciprocity states that if you do something for someone else, they're inclined to do the same for you. Therefore, if you take the time to really listen to someone else, get curious and ask questions, they'll be more inclined to do the same for you. If you pair this active listening with summarizing what you're hearing them say in a neutral, unbiased way, you create an environment where they're much more likely to hear you and then true dialogue can begin.

D. Acknowledge your shared goals

It's easy to get so wrapped up in your differences that you lose sight of your shared interests or objectives. Look for common ground and state it. Sometimes, this means zooming out from the issue, but it's well worth the effort. At the end of the day, you both may want the same thing and simply disagree about how to achieve it. Reminding yourself of that fact and sharing it with the other person gives you a good starting point for a healthier dialogue.



E. If appropriate, apologize sincerely

In the heat of the moment, we may sometimes say things that we later regret. Especially if we feel provoked by the other person, we may use absolute terms (“You always...”), use sarcasm, or even resort to name calling. However, justified you might feel in the moment, rarely do these behaviors further the conversation and lead to resolution. To the contrary, they are often perceived as disrespect, which can be extremely detrimental. If you catch yourself crossing the line into potentially disrespectful behavior, pause, take a (literal or figurative) deep breath, and express your regret and why you regret it. Don’t expect a lot in return from the other person. The goal here is not to have them reciprocate, but to own your part of the conversation and avoid escalating the situation.

F. If necessary, take a break to cool off and reconvene later

Very rarely does the issue at hand have to be resolved immediately. Sometimes, it’s better to say: “What do you think about taking a break from this conversation and revisiting it later today (or tomorrow)?” Sometimes, getting some distance from the conversation will allow you both to get the needed perspective to get unstuck. During your time away, ask yourself how you can approach the conversation in a more constructive way or ask a trusted advisor for their thoughts. Taking a break, clearing your head, and coming at the conversation with a new perspective is sometimes all you need to improve the tone and direction of the conversation.