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Training People, Inspiring Growth

Getting Good at Resolving Conflict

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The ability to engage in healthy conflict conversations is an essential skill for employees at all levels in an organization. Working collaboratively within and across shifts, departments and organizations require that team members tap into the unique perspectives and experiences of

everyone on the team. If team members do not weigh-in, they often will not buy-in to decisions made.

Team members can disagree on any number of issues, including goals, processes, solutions, priorities and resources. We refer to this as “task” conflict. “Relationship” conflict is associated with differences in personality and work style preferences, values and principles and failure to live up to expectations and agreements. This type of conflict can start quickly and escalate rapidly. Unresolved, relationship conflict can result in low morale, strained relationships, poor productivity and lack of commitment.

Getting good at conflict requires courage and the discipline to practice four important steps. Steve Ventura and Eric Harvey refer to these steps as C.A.L.M. in their book, *“What to Do When Conflict Happens.”*

Before confronting another person, the first step is to **clarify** the issue. Stepping back and reflecting on the situation helps you to gain perspective, gather your thoughts and plan your strategy. Ask yourself questions such as *“What am I really upset about?, What do I want to have happen?, What don’t I want to have happen?, How might I be contributing to the problem?, Is this the first time this has happened?, What is my current emotional state?”*

After you have some time to think about these questions, you may decide the issue is not that big of a deal. Perhaps you read too much into a situation, maybe you were tired and overreacted. Upon reflection, if you feel the issue still needs to be addressed, prepare your opening for when you **address** the person.

How you start will set the tone for the entire conversation. Be sure to use the word “I,” not “you” when you open. Be sincere, genuine and even-tempered. Be clear and concise; get to the point as quickly as possible. Opening statements might sound like *“I feel like the tension between us is negatively impacting our ability to complete our work effectively. It is very important to me that we resolve our differences,”* or *“I feel badly about how our relationship has deteriorated over the past month. I need your help to repair whatever is broken between us.”*

Next, describe the situation using specific examples. Focus on facts, not opinions. Avoid loaded words such as *“always,” “never,” “lazy”* or *“negative.”* Share how the behavior or actions made you feel along with the negative impact it is having on you and/or the team. For example, *“When you consistently fail to post your work on the shared drive in a timely manner, it makes me angry. I cannot complete my work in a timely manner without the information you provide. As a result, I’m late with my work.”*

After you open the conversation, it is important to ask for the other person’s views and opinions. Use a transition question like *“I’m interested in your perspective. How do you see the situation?”* or *“What are your thoughts? What do you see as the problem?”* It is important to **listen** and stay open.

This is difficult because, in most conflict situations, both parties feel they are right and their behaviors are justified. Be attentive and demonstrate active listening; show positive non-verbal support and repeat back what you thought you heard to be sure both of you are on the same page. Remember, understanding does not mean agreement.

Finally, **manage** the conversation to a win-win solution or at least, a compromise. *“Do you agree that it is in our best interest to resolve our differences? Do you agree that updating information in a timely manner will help the team?”* Reach agreement that a problem exists.

“What do you need to be able to post the information in a timely manner?” Listen to each other’s concerns and needs Identify what is important to each person; ask open-ended questions and look for common ground. Discuss different alternatives that will help to address both person’s needs and expectations. If a win-win solution does not exist, both must be willing to compromise. *“I’ll agree to begin work on my part of the process earlier so I am not waiting until the last minute to post my updates.”* *“I’ll agree to help prioritize the information I need first.”*

After team members agree on the actions each will take to help resolve the conflict, it is important to follow up. Checking in on how things are working includes praise for the efforts being put forward as well as reminding one another of the agreement.

It is important to always end a conflict conversation with a positive tone. *“Thank you for taking the time to work through this issue with me. I value you as a colleague. I know this will help us to work better together.”*

According to Mr. Harvey and Mr. Ventura, if you clarify the issue, address the problem, listen to both sides and manage your way to resolution, you can stay C.A.L.M. in resolving any conflict. Good advice for all of us at work and home. Well done, however, is better than well said.

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