

Handout
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General Tips on Addressing Conflict

Get to know yourself and your habits in dealing with conflict. Understand how you might impact others. What are the consequences of your style of handling conflict? See if you can try on some new behavior.

Stop and notice your thoughts and feelings.

- Do you need to check the information you are reacting to? Do you have accurate info?
- Are you making any assumption(s) about things, people that you need to test?
- Are you reacting based on old “files” from your history? Remember, you are not powerless in a situation. But that is sometimes our unconscious reaction based on childhood experiences. What is a more constructive way to address this conflict?
- Try to address the conflict differently than your automatic way of withdrawing, avoiding, or “submitting” (pleasing) or getting aggressive.
- Don’t let things “pile up.” Address issues early on so they don’t build into a mountain. At the same time, respect that a person of color may not want to do so with you.
- Remember that “confronting” means making difference explicit. Conflict always involves some difference between the parties involved. Find out what that difference is—facts, style, cultural assumptions, information, expectations, etc.). This helps take it out of the realm of just being “personal.”
- Ask yourself how you may have contributed to the situation. Don’t focus on blaming the other. Take a leadership response by also looking at your own behavior. This doesn’t mean to blame yourself! That is not helpful either.
- It is ok to blow off steam in some safe place, away from others if you need to—go scream in a pillow, on the way home in your car; go work out or exercise; write a letter you don’t mail, etc.

Be mindful of any cultural differences at work in how conflict is addressed.

Seek information about the other’s perspective and experience. Keep some of the cultural differences in mind and seek to understand if different assumptions might be at work. Be willing to understand your impact on the other.

Don’t assume the version of a story you hear is THE version. “Truth” gets lost or misconstrued when passed from person to person.

If the same issues seem to come up over and over again, check for:

- What it is that keeps the person feeling unresolved. Ask the person what it would take to help them resolve the issue.
- Whether you have really got to the root of the problem.
- Whether people are not naming the real issue or are not being direct and specific.
- Good listening: are people hearing each other?
- What other information might be needed to solve the problem.
- Is there someone else who needs to be part of the issue and solution? If something is out of your control, you need to elevate it to someone who can do something. Or you need to let it go and move to acceptance of the situation.

Make expectations explicit. This is a leading cause of conflict. Do not assume someone knows what you want or need. Avoid general statements or fuzzy instructions or agreements.

Decide how you want to address a conflict. Choose if you want to:

- Let it go. This is appropriate if it is really not a big deal to you; or, if it is a no-win situation. Be willing to accept the consequences of not addressing the situation.
- Go for a compromise. This means both parties give up something so as to reach an agreement. This is useful for things that are not that extremely critical. Or, use in situations where you feel able to be flexible. In this type of agreement, each person gives up something and is not getting what they fully want.
- Tell the other what needs to be done. (Directing) This is appropriate if you are needing to assert your direction, you are in charge, or if the issue regards inappropriate behavior that needs to be corrected. Also, some situations require specific knowledge or expertise, so directing may be appropriate.
- Search for a collaborative solution. This is important when the situation has an impact on you, others, and it is an important issue for all parties.

Apologize, if you mean it.