

Managing Conflict

Up to now we have been looking at how you say what you say so that it has the best chance of being understood and accepted by the other, so that the supportive tone to your communication is maintained even when something as difficult as challenging is called for.

But there will be times and situations where the other is not as interested in your support as maintaining their position on an issue. To this point you have done your best at understanding the others position through good listening, encouraging them to be specific etc and through communicating your own position clearly and carefully.

When you sense though that you have to go beyond this - that you have a clash of interests, wants or needs - then basic relating or message sending and receiving skills are not going to be enough. You are entering the arena of conflict. But you do not want to have to fight. And if the issue is not trivial you probably do not want to back down either. You will still need to send and receive messages well but you need something more - an alternative to supportive messages.

Strategies are such an alternative. Ideally you shift to cooperative ones for handling these differences so that you and the other can get back on your respective courses. You could use forceful ones but then you risk damaging the relationship. The most popular strategies are assertiveness, negotiation and conflict resolution. To put these in perspective and to define them look at the graphic and notes below.



Hierarchy of Communication: As the degree of potential or actual conflict increases, increasingly more sophisticated communication skills are called for.

The graphic illustrates the range of abilities needed to handle varying degrees of conflict. Fortunately you do not have to access advanced skills everyday. But there will be times when it helps to have some facility with them. Please note that in real life things are not as compartmentalised as the figure suggests. Some fairly nifty gear-shifting has to go on especially in more conflictual situations .

Primary Skills

These cover your personal qualities (your approachability) and basic communication skills such as non-defensive listening and respect. Many problems and conflicts disappear with just good basic communication: "I see that's how you think about this. It's not how I think about it, but I accept it's how you do." The ability to respect your own and the other's right to be different makes things easier for both. This is especially helpful where personal values and opinions are the issue. When you agree to disagree like this you are sending a message that says you do not have the problem of needing to be right.

By not trying to stubbornly prove the other wrong you show that you realise that, even if the other may not think so, your self-worth has absolutely nothing to do with your values, feelings or opinions. Perhaps humanity's greatest unreasoned fear is of difference. If it is, the rigid expectation to have others think like us makes it the single biggest cause of stress and strain between people.

Intermediate Skills

Conflicts over goals and wants are usually not dismissed so easily by plain self- and other-respect. Here, after good basic communication has been practised, there remains the problem of resolving what and how things will be done. Some of these problems can be resolved by the use of assertiveness strategies, particularly making and negotiating around requests.

Assertiveness means having the confidence and willingness to communicate that is born of beliefs in your assertive rights such as "I have the right to make requests" and strategies such as repeated assertion. This tactic, sometimes called 'broken record', means persistently restating your point until there is some reasonable response.

For example:

" I'd like to help you but I can't while you're yelling at me."

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It is usually then followed by a constructive lead like:

" O.K. tell me what's happened so we can sort this out."
or " What can we do to straighten things out?"

Assertiveness does not mean loudly attacking someone. In fact it has the best chance of working if you combine it with your personal qualities of civility, politeness and kindness especially when it is early in the interchange. This is called 'empathic assertion'. e.g. " I realise that you're upset about what's happened but I can't help straighten things out while you are criticising me ". You can cut back to no frills 'basic assertion' if needs be (e.g. " I can't help you while you are criticising me"). If there is no response to these approaches escalate to 'confrontive assertiveness'.

An example of confrontive assertiveness is:

"If you don't stop yelling then I'm leaving until you settle down."

Here you warn the other of the consequences of his or her continued action or inaction and, if necessary, assertively follow through on your warning.

But what about the situation where people are equally assertive and both take a rightful stance? Then the strategy of negotiation is called for. This simply means working to reach an agreement based on the principle of fairness: " What do you think would be a fair deal here?" This approach and the next are given special attention ahead.

Advanced Skills

What strategies are required when negotiation fails because overt conflict breaks out or there has been too much of it to even start negotiation?

Here the highest and one of the more demanding levels of communication abilities are required - during or before negotiating - conflict-resolution skills. This refers to ways of preventing or at least controlling the aggressive expression of strong feelings like anger or competitiveness.