

Reflections on Managing Conflict

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Take time for prayer and reflection throughout the following steps:

Define the actual concern or disagreement. Separate issues from one another.

Assess your own motives. Why do I feel so strongly about this? Determine your own “baggage.” Has this person or this issue caused you other pain? Is this issue tangled up with other issues? Has this been building up in you because of other experiences?

Attempt to identify and sort your own emotions: anger, embarrassment, rejection, fear of loss, loss of control over a situation, etc. Emotions are normal. Express what you feel.

As your emotions “cool”, test your own reality of the situation. Did you project onto the situation details that were not actually there? Did you make valid inferences? Does conversation about this topic connect to your ego in some specific way? If you are defensive, ask yourself why you are defensive. Psychologist John Gottman wrote, “When you are furious, you can’t be curious.” Cool down enough to be curious.

Determine whether or not you have all the information needed to have a conversation about the topic. How will you get the needed information?

Resolve that in order to keep the relationship, you will have a dialogue and not a debate. Debate focuses on defending a position and winning. Dialogue focuses on mutual understanding.

See if there is a “log in your own eye.” Identify and own up to the ways in which you have contributed to the conflict.

Work to find non-inflammatory language to use to describe your emotions. Determine how you might help the other person “walk in your shoes”.

If possible, plan the time for discussion. Do it when all involved are rested and likely to respond well to the other person’s concerns. Keep it as private as possible.

Ask permission. Rather than jumping into the details, you might say, “I have something sensitive that I would like to talk with you about. Would that be okay?” It sets the tone for the rest of the conversation.

Affirm the relationship in a way that is comfortable for you. “I want to talk because... (say what is true) you are important to me, our friendship is important to me, I respect you, I think we misunderstood each other or I don’t want to be at odds with you, etc.”

Define the actual concern or disagreement and stick to that issue. If other issues emerge, note them for later.

Use the principles of reflective listening/active listening. Namely, each person works to:

1. *Speak carefully.* Use language about you, not about the other party. Describe what you experienced and how you feel. Describe the outcome you would like to see. Take care not to inflame and accuse.
2. *Listen carefully.* Re-state what you are hearing. Ask questions. Listen with empathy. Do you understand what the other person has experienced? Do you know why the other person feels the way he or she does? Do you know exactly what the other person wants?

Mediation pioneer Richard Salem describes active listening this way: “Empathetic listening, also called active listening and reflective listening, is a way of responding to another person with the goal genuine understanding. It enables the listener to receive and accurately interpret the speaker’s message. When done well, empathetic listening builds trust and respect, enables the disputants to release their emotions, reduces tension, encourages the surfacing of information and creates a safe environment that is conducive to collaboration and problem solving.”

Tips: Do your best not to be formulating your next thought while the other person is speaking. Control the urge to tell your side before you have displayed that you understand the other person. Demonstrate that you are genuinely invested in the other person’s views by restating his or her position in your own words. Ask the other person to correct your understanding of her or his thoughts and feelings. “Did I understand that right?” is a good follow-up question to restating the other person’s thoughts.

Practice simple courtesies. Impatient people look at their watches, interrupt, ask others to hurry up, tap their feet and don’t allow others to finish their line of thinking. Be aware of these behaviors and add a few seconds to your normal response time. Be willing to pause before speaking to make sure the other person has completed his or her thought.

Begin to seek solutions that have the interests of both parties in mind. When one person offers a solution, state the solution back to the speaker and take time to think things through before responding. Modify one another’s solutions. Reach “outside the box” with creativity for more options. *Work hard to find common ground.*

Know your own “hot buttons.” Take breaks if emotions begin to get out of control. Breaks often help people reconsider options that they were reluctant to consider previously. Don’t rush the process. Allow time to thoroughly define the problem and its nuances and brainstorm creative alternatives.

When a conflict is beginning, both sides have a limited view of the whole picture. As the process unfolds, there is almost always new information that is brought to light and viable solutions are discovered. Try to validate and affirm areas of agreement rather than focusing only on the issues where there is disagreement. Be willing to break the problem into smaller parts or reframe the issues to put them in a different perspective. Stay optimistic about the chances for success. *One of the biggest obstacles to conflict resolution is the belief that any particular conflict cannot be solved.*

Along the way, offer and receive forgiveness as needed. Say the things that need to be said to clear the way for the future.

At the end, whether or not there has been full agreement, allow for a time of gratitude.

Express appreciation for the listening that has been done and the care that has been given for the relationship itself. Acknowledge if there has been anything new learned.