Conflict Resolution and Shared Decision-Making

Marriage entails making many decisions together. Every decision is a potential conflict. Whereas one person can fairly easily decide what time to eat dinner, what car to buy, and how high to hang pictures on the walls, two people addressing decisions together becomes more complicated. Tension is likely to rise. No one wants to lose out on getting what they want.

Interestingly, successful conflict resolution and shared decision making are one and the same. They proceed along the same three steps. What differs is just the initial tone. We tend to label the process conflict resolution if differences have created adversarial stances or an argument. If dialogue from the outset has been cooperative, the three win-win steps become shared decision making.

Decisions Focus on the Future

All decisions are inherently future oriented. The future under discussion may be close—as close as the next few minutes. For instance, “Shall we stay at the party longer or go home now?” Sometimes, by contrast, shared decision-making looks ahead to the distant future. “Shall we aim to travel to Africa in five years if we can save enough to take a month off from our jobs?”

Practice with Your Partner

What decisions, small or large, do you have ahead in your life? List two, preferably fairly easy ones.

1. 
2. 

Taking one of these decisions at a time, practice your shared decision-making skills. Use the win-win waltz worksheet to help you to stay on track.

Hint: If you become stuck, put aside this decision until you have completed the next chapter on conflict-resolution tips and traps to avoid. Work on an easier decision for now.

After you have completed these decision-making experiments, answer the following questions.

• How clear were you about distinguishing among mutual positions, concerns, and solutions?

• To what extent did the plan of action you agreed on by the end of step three feel genuinely satisfactory to both of you?

The hardest part of shared decision-making is recognizing when to use it. Anytime you need to make a plan or decide what you will do about something, use the win-win waltz. Any time one of you wants one thing and the other wants something else, use the win-win waltz. Any time you become aware of rising tensions, check if a decision is at stake. Some tensions stem from communication glitches or from behavior that seemed to be out-of-bounds. Most of the rest of the time, though, tensions are signs of conflict, and conflict means that you need to make a shared win-win waltz decision.