



Conscious Communication

An Introduction to Conflict

What is conflict?

When we want something other than what we have, we are in conflict. The conflict may be within ourselves: "I need to finish my report, but I want to go dancing." The conflict may be external to ourselves, based in dissatisfaction with the behavior of another person: "He constantly interrupts me. I wish he would listen." There can be conflict within a group of people: "Some of us want to get the project done now and some of us think it can be postponed." Conflict can also occur between groups: "Your agency's policies are inconsistent with our agency's objectives."

What causes conflict?

- Limited resources such as time, money, materials, labour
- Unmet emotional needs such as the need to belong, to make a contribution, the need for recognition, for appreciation, and love
- a difference in perception, assumptions or values

- a lack of information
- a lack of understanding of intent or meaning
- competing interests
- control issues such as differences in power, authority, and autonomy
- psychological problems, personality traits and learning styles
- cultural and gender differences

Why is conflict so difficult?

Many people are uncomfortable with conflict because of the strong emotions involved. There can also be fears about losing relationships or not being liked. Dominant North American culture teaches us to get along and "be nice," and conflict is not "nice." As a result, few of us have much positive experience dealing with conflict.

How do people usually deal with conflict?

In conflict we often feel threatened, powerless, or overwhelmed by need or vulnerability. These feelings can lead us to try a number of strategies. We may try to take care of ourselves by bolstering our self-esteem. We may deny, ignore, or avoid the conflict, until we reach our limit of tolerance. At that point we may:

- "make nice" out of a need for acceptance, quickly apologize, and give up our own needs or desires
- make jokes out of anxiety, or use sarcasm and put downs
- look for someone to blame to avoid being blamed

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- explode in a rage or cry in desperation, to drown out the complaint or emphasize (empower) our own complaint

- intimidate, lay down rules, or make threats

- punish: by withdrawing into silence, leaving, withholding information and/or resources, name calling or using physical force.

In the short run, we may get what we want using one or another of these strategies, but we are often sorry about it later when the solutions are not mutual.

How can we more effectively deal with conflict?

Effectively resolving conflicts requires a process of mutual education. We need to educate each other about our needs, desires and points of view.

The first step is creating a climate of receptivity. In doing this, it is often helpful to understand the other's needs and wants, before focussing on our own. We need to consciously connect with the other person by listening carefully to:

- what they are reacting to?

- what they are feeling?

- what beliefs, values or perspective gives rise to their feelings?

- what do they want from us now?

If we can empathize with the other person's position, that is, feel and understand what they are going through, and express this back to them to their satisfaction, the interaction changes. We have a much greater chance of being heard ourselves and reaching a solution satisfying to both.

The crucial element is our being able to establish an empathic connection with the other person before we can begin to solve problems and decide on a plan of action. To do this, we will need to understand emotions, and be aware of our own processes and triggers (things we react to in an instant), and how to keep these reactions out of the way. We need to learn to understand "negative" messages as stemming from the other's unexpressed desires.

It is possible to see conflict as an opportunity. Learning to deal effectively with conflict is a life-long learning process and an invaluable skill at any level of competence. It requires the ability to take risks, feel comfortable making mistakes, and lots of support, feedback and self-empathy. It requires a willingness to discover the power of our vulnerability, our humanness, and our compassion.

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