



## Navigating conflicts

When it comes to conflicts, they can be extremely time-consuming and leave resentments behind even when they have been "resolved." Although some battles are certainly worth fighting, the important question is, "Which ones?" In his book, *Working Anger: Preventing and Resolving Conflict on the Job*, Ronald T. Potter-Efron suggests several criteria that typically should be met to justify engaging in a conflict.

- It should be about an issue that directly and significantly impacts, or could reasonably be predicted to impact your sphere of responsibility.
- It should be about something that can actually be changed.
- It should matter enough to you to be worth the time and energy it will consume.

- There should be a reasonable chance you can get the desired result or some compromise result that will at least partially meet your goal.
- There should be little likelihood that pursuing this conflict will prove detrimental to something more important to you now or down the road.
- You should be aware of the risks involved and be prepared for the worst possible results, up to and including being terminated. If being fired, or the worst possible consequence is totally unacceptable, you must ask yourself if you are truly willing to take the risk.

### **Seven steps to fair conflict resolution**

Conflicts seldom go away by themselves. They require open, clear, deliberate communication if they are going to be resolved. Often, a conflict evaporates when the different points of view get a chance to be heard in a calm setting. Those who are experienced in conflict resolution have learned to follow these steps.

1. Arrange a meeting with all parties involved in the conflict.
2. Acknowledge that there's a conflict. Make sure all parties verbally agree on the nature of the conflict.
3. When discussing your role in the conflict, use "I" statements. Encourage others to do the same. "I feel \_\_\_ when \_\_\_". This allows the participants to take responsibility for themselves, instead of placing the blame on others.
4. Ask direct questions about the situation.
5. Confirm your understanding. For example, "If I understand correctly, this is how you see the situation..."
6. Allow all parties involved to discuss what outcome they hope to achieve.
7. Whether you come to an agreement, agree to work toward a resolution that benefits everyone. Schedule a follow-up meeting to determine if the solution is working, or if some tweaking may be necessary.

Is there a conflict in one of your personal or working or school relationships that need to be resolved? Why not share these steps with the other person and see if you can agree to use them to achieve a resolution? Afterward, write a few notes about what worked well and what would make the process work better for the future.

### **Rules for fighting fair**

Many couples have found it helpful to agree upon "ground rules" that "govern" how to express anger and how to respond to an angry partner. Here are some suggestions:

- Recognize anger/conflict when it occurs and decide to communicate it to your partner in a healthy way. What is it you are angry or in conflict about?
- Choose a time that is good for both of you to discuss the matter. Depending upon the intensity of your anger you may need to give yourself some time to "cool down" before discussing the issue. Choose a time when there will be no distractions, when you can give each other undivided attention and when neither of you are tired, hungry, rushed to meet a deadline, or have been using a mood altering substance.
- Begin by describing the issue and why it is upsetting to you. Speak calmly and use "I" statements, rather than "you" statements. "I" statements communicate that you take responsibility for your feelings; "you" statements often are perceived as attacks. Be concise.
- Once you have defined the issue or topic to be discussed, let your partner "have the floor" to respond. While your partner is talking, really listen to understand their perception and to learn how he/she is feeling.
- Remind yourself to avoid being defensive at what your partner says. Practice some of the quick tips for anger management if you notice your anger growing (breathe deeply, count to 10, use calming self-talk, focus on trying to really understand your partner's feelings).
- Reflect or paraphrase in your own words what you understood your partner to say. This communicates that you are really listening and ensures that you correctly understood the partner's message and intent.
- Take turns talking. Don't dominate the conversation by speaking excessively long, talking at the same time, or talking excessively loud. (Tip: some couples use a small piece of linoleum or carpet as a prop. The person speaking with this prop in their hand "has the floor". When that person is finished talking the prop is handed to the other person who then "has the floor", or the right to begin speaking).
- Stick with the current matter being discussed. Don't wander to other topics or bring up issues from the past.
- Avoid communicating in ways that fan the emotional flames such as name-calling, cursing, threatening, sarcasm and blaming.
- If anger or other emotions become too intense consider calling a time-out to regain composure and return to rational thinking. Agree on a time frame for getting back together to continue the discussion.
- Ask yourself and your partner what each of you really wants in this matter. Brainstorm ideas for a solution that would allow both of you to "win." Consider a trial period for potential solutions. Identify possible obstacles and create a contingency plan.
- Admit when you are wrong. Recognize and express appreciation for positive effort by your partner to resolve the issue.

- Ensure that both of you have a mutual understanding of the solution reached and how to proceed in implementing it.
- Check for any remaining anger or ill feelings following the discussion.

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