

3 Tools for Highly Effective Conflict Management

by Jeannie Gunter, MA, CEO Transformative Training

The ability to handle conflicts skilfully is one of the most important tools a leader has in his/her “toolbox.” Great conflict management skills will move you from being a good leader to one that inspires leadership in others.

When we are called in to teach conflict management or mediation skills to teams, what we have noticed over the years is that most people are avoiders – they tend to let conflicts build up because addressing them is too uncomfortable. Other people are confronters, and their conflict style is direct, but often intimidating to avoiders. There are generally very few people who can address conflict openly, compassionate, and effectively.

The good news is that managing conflict is a skill, like any other, that can be learned and practiced. The truth is that conflict management is a complex set of skills that takes time to master. However, there are some simple practices that can immediately take your skills to the next level. The three steps to follow are; **1. Get clear headed 2. Determine underlying needs and 3. Make clear requests.**

Get Clear Headed: This is a basic guideline that may seem like common sense – but as they say, common sense isn’t always common! The premise is that when emotions are heightened, our rationality decreases. Think back to the last time when you felt angry and you will most likely remember that the emotion of anger took over and it may have been difficult to communicate clearly. If you are in a situation where you are finding yourself or someone else getting upset to the point where you are blaming, judging and can not see the other person’s point of view, it’s time to take a break. It is a wise move to call for a break and come back to conversation at a time when you have been able to reflect on your underlying needs and requests. The key here is to be sure that you schedule a time to complete the conversation! Too many people brush conflicts under the rug and let resentments build up over time which can have adverse consequences for working relationships. Get clear headed, and then get into communication.

Determine Underlying Needs: I am going to make a bold claim here. Not getting one’s needs met is the only reason conflict occurs. Again, reflect on the last time you were involved in a conflict. If you are honest with yourself, you will probably find that there was some need of yours that wasn’t being met. For example, if you are upset that your boss doesn’t listen to your ideas, you may have had a need to be heard or acknowledged or to contribute. Once you have identified your underlying need, you can communicate that need in a way that doesn’t blame the other person and look for ways to get your need met. The trickiest part of this step is that you also need to be able to listen for and identify the OTHER person’s need! What people usually find is that if they can shift their focus to identifying the other’s need, it makes the conflict less personal. The conflict isn’t about you – it’s just that someone else is trying to get their needs met just as you are! When we can recognize that we all have the same basic underlying needs we can approach conflict management with more compassion and objectivity.

Make Clear Requests: This last step is very important in moving the conflict forward into action. Once you have identified your own and the other's needs, now it is time to make a request. An important distinction here is that a request is just that – it is a question, not a demand. You must be prepared for a yes or no answer. So, if I say to the CEO of the company – I'd really like to be contributing (need) more to the company vision and I'd like to schedule an appointment so that you can hear my ideas (request), her/his response might be yes or no. If the response is no, you have to look for other ways to present your request or other avenues to get your need (to contribute) filled. Remember, the other person will also have requests of their own that you will need to be open to listening to.

Navigating the dance of conflict is not a simple or easy process, but by using these three tools your odds of a smoother interaction is much higher. We also recommend that you read [Nonviolent Communication](#) by Marshall Rosenberg for a more in-depth description of this approach. If your team is committed to harnessing the creative power of conflict, please utilize us as a resource – we would be happy to facilitate a day-long or multi-day program to increase your proficiency in conflict management.

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