

SEVEN GUIDELINES FOR HANDLING CONFLICTS CONSTRUCTIVELY

The following article by Thomas Jordon was published online by www.mediate.com and www.HR.com.

- 1) Ask yourself what it is you don't know yet. Keep in mind that you don't know what story is foremost in other people's minds. Each individual has his or her own story about what is important and why. Insight into these different stories can make a great difference for how you and other people handle conflict. Take on conflict situations with an intention to understand more about what is going on. Ask open-ended questions, questions that help you to understand the background of the conflict better. People's images of what is significant in specific situations are important reasons for their actions. These images can change, thereby changing the parties' attitudes and actions. Remember also to remain open to learning new things about yourself and how other people perceive you. Maybe other parties feel that you have contributed more to the problems than you are aware of.
- 2) Make a distinction between the problem and the person. Formulate the conflict issues as shared problems that you have to solve cooperatively. Abstain from blaming and voicing negative opinions about others. State clearly what you feel and want and invite your counterpart to help in finding solutions. Opinions and emotions should be expressed in ways that facilitate the process of achieving satisfying outcomes. Keep in mind that there is always some kind of positive intention behind people's actions, even if unskillfully expressed.
- 3) Be clear, straight-forward and concrete in your communication. State clearly what you have seen, heard and experienced that influenced your views in the matter at hand. Tell the other person what is important to you, why you find it important, what you feel, and what you hope for. Express your own emotions and frustrated needs in clear and concrete words. Ask for the counterpart's fears and needs in a way that conveys that you care about them.
- 4) Maintain the contact with your counterpart. Breaking off the contact with the counterpart in a conflict often leads to a rapid conflict escalation. Do what you can to keep the communication going. Work to improve your relationship even if there are conflict issues that seem impossible to resolve. Offer to do something small that meets one of your counterpart's wishes and suggest small things your counterpart can do to meet your own needs and wishes. Even if marginal, such acts can strengthen the hope that it will be possible to change the nature of the relationship in a positive direction.
- 5) Look for the needs and interests that lie behind concrete positions. Bargaining about positions often leads to stalemates or unsatisfying solutions. Inquire into what needs and interests would be satisfied by certain concrete demands and explore if there are alternatives and mutually acceptable ways of satisfying those

- needs and interests. Regard blaming, accusations and negative opinions as unskillful ways of expressing emotions. Show understanding for the feelings of the other party without letting yourself be provoked by their attacks. Inquire into what is really important and significant for yourself and keep those values and needs in mind during the course of the conflict.
- 6) Make it easy for your counterpart to be constructive. Avoid triggering the defensiveness of your counterpart by blaming, accusing, criticizing, and diagnosing. Extend appreciation and respect for the counterpart where you can do so sincerely. Show your counterpart that you care about the issues and needs that are important to him or her. Take responsibility for your own contributions to the conflict events.
 - 7) Develop your ability to look at the conflict from the outside. Review the conflict history in its entirety. Notice what kinds of actions influence the tensions of the conflict in positive and negative directions. Take care to develop your awareness of how you can influence the further course of events in the conflict in a constructive direction. Test your own image of what is going on by talking with impartial persons. Assume responsibility for what happens. Take on problems you see as early as possible, before they have a chance to develop into major conflict issues.

Compiled from:

- Fisher, R. and Ury, W. (1981), Getting to Yes. Negotiating Agreements Without Giving In, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.
- Glasl, F. (1999), Confronting Conflict. A First-Aid Kit for Handling Conflict, Stroud: Hawthorne Press.
- Rosenberg, M. (1999), Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion, PuddleDancer Press.
- Stone, D., Patton, B., and Heen, S. (1999), Difficult Conversations. How to Discuss What Matters Most, New York: Penguin Books.
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*“Usually our response to an angry person focuses on where we disagree.
Using the ‘100 + 1% principle’ means that you find the 1% that
you agree with and agree with it 100%.”*

Dr. T. Ursiny, from “The Coach’s Handbook”, by Advantage Coaching and Training Inc.

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