Mental Health Matters

Conflict Resolution Skills: Keep a conflict from becoming violent or destructive

Conflict is one of the few constants in life. There is no escape from it, whether at home or work. How we respond to conflict makes all the difference. It helps to recognize that the conflicts that really matter involve people, being able to work with people, lead people, and live harmoniously with others depends on our ability to respond to conflict positively.

The Importance of Addressing Conflict

Many circumstances may delay resolving a conflict, such as the presence of other people, a pressing deadline, or simple physical and emotional exhaustion. Conflicts often remain unresolved because many of us have been taught that if something makes us uncomfortable, it's better to avoid it. We are frequently uncomfortable addressing conflict because we fear we may hurt other's feelings. Or we resist exploring personal issues and emotions that we prefer to ignore, including that we might be partly to blame for the conflict. We may be uncomfortable simply because we think resolving the conflict will take too much time and energy or because of real or perceived repercussions.

But ultimately, if we don't address a conflict, we end up hurting ourselves and the other person involved.

Conflict resolution is typically a process. Many interpersonal conflicts have grown over the years and cannot be resolved with one heart-to-hear encounter. Resolving conflicts with people we don't completely trust is even more difficult, but progress still is possible

Difficulties are meant to rouse, not discourage. The human spirit is to grow strong by conflict.

-William Ellery Channing

Increasing Organizational Costs

1976 -- Up to 30% or a typical managers time is spent dealing with conflict (Thomas, K and Schmidt, W. "A survey of managerial interests with respect to conflict. Academy of Management Journal).

1996 -- 42% of a manager's time is spent on reaching agreement with others when conflicts occur (Watson, C. and Hoffman, R. "Managers as Negotiators." Leadership Quarterly).

Strategies for Productive Conflict Encounters

The top ten tips and caveats for resolving conflict productively:

1. Conflict is healthy and essential for any relationship to prosper!
2. There is never "just the right time" to resolve a conflict.
3. If a conflict is avoided, it usually gets bigger and bigger.
4. Two willing parties are needed to resolve a conflict
5. The only conflict response you can control is your own.
6. Active listening will diffuse almost any conflict.
7. The presence of conflict suggests that parties have differing needs and wants. Use conflict resolution skills that allow for a "win-win" to occur.
8. Hooking into another's conflict style and stretching out of your own conflict style will create an atmosphere where the chances of conflict resolution are improved.
9. Choose your conflicts. Some are not worth your time, efforts, and consequences.
10. Mutual respect is the key to productive conflict responses.

Often, we find it easier to work with people whose styles are similar to ours. However, homogeneity of styles may not be the most productive. The trick to productive conflict resolution is learning to work with people with different conflict resolution styles – and to change our own response style when it's not working.

(Adapt and reprint with permission from Charles Stoner, DBA, and Lori Russell-Chapin, Ph.D, NCC, CCMHC, LCPC. Bradley University)

Conflict Resolution Styles

Most of us have preferred way of responding to conflict, regardless of circumstance. Each of the five basic conflict response styles has particular strength and each has potential problem.

Intimidating – intimidators are able to move their immediate agendas, but can also offend others and prompt defensive reactions.

Withdrawing – withdrawers, when acting judiciously, can gain political chips to be used in the future, but coworkers often see withdrawers as being weak or indifferent.

Nurturing – nurturers bring sensitivity and personal concern for others to decisions, but can yield and capitulate to the point of sacrificing important personal needs.

Directing – directors take risks and are willing to venture into the arena of unstructured decisions, but can be seen as abrasive and self-serving.

Analytic – analyzers make sure all bases have been covered before action is taken, but can become so focused on gathering additional information that key decisions are avoided.

"Conflict Resolution is effective in counteracting the development of attitudes, beliefs, and interventions that lead to violence. The penetration of conflict resolution into diverse strata from community to business strengthens the norm that there are a variety of options in resolving conflicts."

(Larry Cohen, MSW, Rachel Davis, MSW, and Manal Aboelata. The National Institute for Dispute Resolution, 1998.)

Leveraging the Power of the Web to Help Resolve Student Conflicts

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Student Affairs Online: Fall 2002 • Vol. 3, No. 4

Conflict is a fact of student life. Not only do students experience the daily problems of living and working together, but they also experience interactions with people who are different from themselves. Fears rooted in stereotypes, their own and others, and fears of confronting those stereotypes may surface. Students face personality conflicts and conflicts stemming from testing boundaries and learning the real meaning of independence and personal and group responsibility. Students must also face conflicts with landlords, merchants, and roommates. And in the academic realm, they find out whether their standards for work are acceptable.

In all these categories, students learn lessons about how to handle conflict from the institution and from their peers. **Since few 18-year olds have developed good conflict resolution skills, using each other as models of how to manage and solve conflicts is often ineffective. Research on roommates in conflict suggests that typical first and second year students are often not developmentally prepared to effectively negotiate interpersonal conflicts with roommates on their own. As a result, the ways a college handles conflict must serve not only to maintain rules and order, but also to teach conflict resolution.**

It is also clear that the World Wide Web has become an essential part of academic life. Email has become virtually unavoidable, web browsers are a standard feature of most campus information delivery systems, campus libraries are serving up electronic full-text resources like never before, and first year students are routinely being provided with computers for use in their rooms.

Taking advantage of the "wiredness" of today's campuses, Wayne State University, with support from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), has developed a new website designed to help institutions support students' appropriate use of conflict resolution skills.

The site -- http://www.campus-adr.org

- adopts a virtual campus metaphor as the framework for content delivery.
- visitors start on the Main Quad (an image map of an imaginary campus) and can then choose to visit the Student Center, the Faculty Club, the Classroom Building, the Main Library, etc. where they find content tailored to particular user groups.

Some Helpful Links

- A conflict resolution tools and tips page has useful information, including advice for dealing with roommate and group conflicts

  (www.campus-adr.org/Student_Center/tips_student.html).

- The Program Development Incubator is for staff or students interested in forming a mediation center on campus. The information presented on this page will help individuals build a quality program

  http://www.campus-adr.org/CR_Services_Cntr/incubator.html).

- Tips and sample documents encouraging students to use constructive conflict resolution methods

  www.campus-adr.org/CR_Services_Cntr/marketing.html).

- The Campus Mediation Programs Networking Directory is a searchable database of more than 160 programs and will aid in networking and program development

  www.campus-adr.org/CR_Services_Cntr/network_crs.html).

- The quarterly Conflict Management in Higher Education Report has feature articles exploring innovations in academic conflict handling, article abstracts, resource reviews and news

  www.campus-adr.org/CMHER/Newsletter).

- For writers and scholars, a comprehensive, annotated bibliography of the literature on campus conflict and conflict resolution. It is available in both a static and searchable format

  www.campus-adr.org/Main_Library/higheredbib.html).

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Most violence is unplanned and starts as an argument over something 'small'."

(Prothrow-Stith, D. and Spivak, H. 'Violence', 1992)

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CAPS Upcoming Events

Eating Disorders Awareness Day

Tuesday, February 7

11am – 2pm

UC Lobby

Anxiety Screening Day

Thursday, April 20

10am – 4pm

UC Lobby

The Division of Student Life and Diversity