

# A Process for Handling Emotional Conflict

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A useful distinction has to be made between emotional and substantive aspects of conflict. The emotional component includes anger, distrust, defensiveness, scorn, resentment, fear and rejection. When feelings are strong, there is usually a sound strategy to deal with emotional aspects of conflict. First, substantive issues can be handled more constructively once emotions have subsided.

Substantive issues involve conflicting needs, disagreements over policies and practices, differing conceptions of roles and uses of resources.

These two aspects of conflict interact with one another. The leader and the manager have to be clear of these two dimensions. Substantive conflict often generates emotional conflict, like anger and distrust. Emotional conflict can multiply the substantive issues. These two components are frequently, not to say always, inter-wined and difficult to separate.

My empirical argument has been that many approaches to conflict resolution stress the importance of rationally examining specific issues at the outset. My experience suggests that maybe this should be the second step.

When feelings run high, rational problem solving needs to be preceded by a loosely-couple exchange of the emotional aspects of the controversy. Being rational at all times, or at least pretending to be, can generate profound irrationality. If practitioners can distinguish and work with this very complex psychological process of fostering emotions recede, they can move on to the next stage of rational and creative examination of the substantive issues of any that divide them. About 80% of any conflict is emotional!

There is a reason why the rational approach rarely works when emotions are strongly engaged. Emotional arousal actually makes us different people than we are in moments of greater calmness. When people are angry or fearful, their adrenaline flows faster and their strength increases 20 percent! The live, pumping

sugar into the blood stream demands more oxygen from the heart and the lungs. The veins become enlarged and the cortical centers, where thinking takes place, do not perform nearly well. The blood supply to the problem solving part of the brain is severely decreased because, under stress, a greater portion of blood is diverted to the body's extremities. This is an emotional condition that the person is in, and it means that, while he/she is beautifully equipped for a brawl, he/she is very poorly equipped to get the problem solved in a healthy manner.

When managing any kind of conflict, the first goal is to deeply understand and deal constructively with the emotions.

The robust psychological conflict resolution way can be thought of as a set of simple rules that govern conflict. Conflict can be very destructive if not governed by rules of shared understandings. Thus, when burly wrestlers attack each other on the mat, they know they will be protected from certain types of harm by the rules they have come to share.

The psychological conflict resolution perspective can be thought of as a set of flexible rules to govern interpersonal strife which provide a process for handling emotion-laden disagreements. The process encourages assertive communication and the expression of feelings and does not allow any verbal or written disrespect which tends to be very destructive in any relationship.

As many psychology researchers have established a three-step loosely coupled process of conflict resolution helps people manage constructively in an organized, non-injurious, growth-producing way. I can give personal testimony that when you follow this process you can arrive at very solid solutions, even under conditions of high stress or crisis.

The first step is that of always treating the other person with real respect and dignity. What does this mean in the midst of a controversy? One of my favorite psychologists and good friend Clark Moustakas answers this question in his book, "Who will listen? Children and Parents in Therapy" He says that in the healthy and creative dispute, the people involved are aware of the other's full legitimacy! Neither loses sight of the fact that they are seeking to express the truth... as they see it (Antonio Machado, What truth... Your truth...) in no way is either person reduced by this. Such a confrontation (working face to face), within a healthy

environment of genuine solidarity and relatedness of self grows authentically through real communication with other persons, and to realize the worth of simplicity and directives in relationship.

Martin Buber, one of the modern world's finest philosophers, explains this process of real dialogue in his book "The Knowledge of Man". He says that respect and dignity for another person is an attitude conveyed by specific behaviors. The way we listen to others, look at them, our tone of voice, our selection of written and spoken words, the type of reasoning we use, the discretion reserve or personal consideration that we show convey our ethical standards for the other person. The psychology of silence is about showing respect and dignity.

An act of character and will power is needed to avoid the gravitational pull into disrespect. The exertion of moral force is required to treat the other as a person of worth and dignity with who we will enter a dialogue of equals.

The second step is that of listening until you experience the other side. During conflict, when feelings are strong, people are especially prone to misunderstanding one another. To prevent this condition, Carl Rogers on "Personal Power" created this psychological rule: Each person can speak up for himself/herself only after he/she has first restated the ideas and feelings of the previous speaker accurately, and to the speaker's satisfaction. When the other person feels (heard), you have earned the right to speak your point of view and express your feelings!

The third step is that of stating your view as needs, and feelings. Five guidelines are useful at this psychological step of conflict resolution process.

1. State your point of view briefly
2. Avoid spoken or written loaded words
3. Say what you mean and mean what you say
4. Disclose your feelings without depending on anyone else
5. Work together to come to an agreement that benefits both parties

When people use this process for handling emotional conflict skillfully, the effects usually are dramatically positive.

The best and productive human relationships usually exist on the other side of conflict.

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