

# Emotional Clearance

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While human emotions are throbbing with fears, angers, and self defensive urge, it is not possible to have an open-minded, honest and loving discussion with another person. A kind of emotional clearance and ventilation is necessary before any human being is ready for a constructive discussion. Thus, a useful distinction can be made between the emotional and the substantive aspects of conflict. The emotional components include anger, distrust, defensiveness, scorn, resentment, fear and rejection. When feelings are strong, it is usually a wise strategy to deal with the emotional aspects of conflict or crisis first. Substantive issues can be managed more constructively once emotions have subsided.

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

The emotional and the substantive aspects of conflict interact with one another. Substantive conflict often generates emotional conflict and when these two components combine for a sustained period of time, a crisis can occur. The lesson is that emotional conflict can multiply the substantive issues. These two dimensions are often intertwined and difficult to separate.

The old paradigm of conflict management stresses the importance of rationally opening specific issues at the outset. As I have always shared with friends, colleagues, students and customers, this should be the second step. The empirical proposition is beautiful and simple: When feelings run high, rational problem solving needs to be preceded by a structured exchange of the emotional aspects of the controversy. After this has been worked out and the emotions recede the person, the group or the team may proceed to the next stage, which is a more rational and creative ponderation of the substantive issues, if any, that divide them. Again, there is a tendency to jump into the substantive issues of a conflict jeopardizing the possibilities of arriving to a psychological understanding.

There is a reason why a rational approach rarely works when emotions are strongly engaged. Emotional arousal makes human beings different people than they are in moments of calmness. When humans are angry or fearful, their adrenaline flows faster and their strength increases

about 20%. The liver, pumping sugar into the blood stream, demands more oxygen from the heart and lungs. The veins become enlarged and the cortical centers, where thinking takes place, do not perform nearly as well. The blood supply to the problem-solving part of the brain is severely decreased because, under stress, a greater portion of the blood is diverted to the body's extremities. George Odiorne (Objectives Focused Management) makes the point that this is an emotional condition that the person is in, and it means that, while he or she is beautifully equipped for a brawl, he or she is very poorly equipped to get a problem solved.

In conflict resolution and in mayor psychological crisis, the first goal is to deal in a healthy manner with the emotions involved.

A conflict resolution strategy is a set of simple rules that govern conflict. Conflict can be too dangerous, and can escalate into extreme crisis, if it is not governed by shared rules. For instance, when burly wrestlers attack each other on the mat, they know they will be protected from certain types of violence by the rules that govern the sport. When the heavy weight boxer climbs into the ring, he has some kind of security of knowing that there are certain things his opponent cannot attempt because the rules forbid it and the referee will enforce the rules. When political parties battle for the privilege of leading the country, they agree to follow specific laws.

The problem is that there are important areas in life where people have not reached shared understanding. When a husband and a wife pitch into each other, there are usually no agreed-upon rules designed to protect them or their marriage. The same is the case in relationships among friends and team members.

A strategy for conflict resolution is a sound process for handling emotion-laden disagreements. The process encourages assertive communication and the expression of feelings. Within this framework, it is totally prohibited typical verbal free-for-all which blocks creative and healthy resolution of conflict that tends to be very destructive for any relationship.

The simple process flow is the following:

1. Treat always the other person with dignity and respect. This is what Clark Moustakas (Who Will Listen) refers to as cultivating the awareness of the other person's full legitimacy, not losing sight of the perspective that he is trying to express the truth as he sees it.

2. Listen attentively until you experience the other side. This means that you listen and repeat back the other person's expression, step by step, just as that person seems to have it at that moment.
3. State your views, needs and feelings; this means sharing your meaning with the other person.

It was the distinguished philosopher Martin Buber (The Knowledge of Man) who emphasized that dignity and respect for another person are attitudes conveyed by specific behaviors. The way we listen to others, look at them, our tone of voices, our selection of words, our type of reasoning and our emotional clearance establish our scope of respect.

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