



COMMUNICATING THROUGH CONFLICT

BY RONNIE MOORE

Where there are people, there is conflict. It affects us all. The failure to communicate effectively, or to communicate at all, is a leading cause of conflict's existence and escalation. If not confronted early and well, conflicts will escalate, negatively affecting entire families, neighborhoods, and organizations.

We can't banish conflict from our lives, but we can communicate more effectively through it. It's a topic that can fill volumes, but you can get a handle on it by using these five tips:

1. Distinguish Between True Conflicts and False Conflicts.

Before you can think about how to communicate through a conflict, decide whether you need to communicate at all. Not all conflicts need to be resolved. Before you do or say anything, ask yourself, "Is this a true conflict or a false conflict?"

A true conflict has to be resolved. If not resolved, it will get bigger and result in a negative consequence.

Your child has a drug problem. You and the child's other parent have a conflict about how to intervene. No intervention happens, and the child is not being helped. This is a true conflict.

You and your colleague must write a grant proposal. There is conflict about how to write the proposal and how to allocate your time to it. As a result, there is a risk that the proposal will not be the best it can be and might not be completed on time. There is risk, therefore, that your organization will not receive this much-needed grant. This is a true conflict.

False conflicts are differences that don't have to be resolved. You and your colleague disagree about how smart your boss is. That does not have

to be resolved for the two of you to be able to work, share a break, or attend meetings together.

You and your spouse disagree about a movie. You don't have to convince your spouse that it was a great (or horrible) movie. You don't have to agree on the movie's merits to be happy together.

There are two parts of any conflict: the issue and the persons attached to the issue.

Be careful. Choose your battles. Let the false conflicts go. Refuse to engage in unnecessary arguments and debates. There's nothing wrong with a rousing political debate or a lively discussion containing different opinions. If you get known, however, as someone who always argues everything, you will lose your credibility with the people around you, and they will no longer want to listen to anything you say, even when what you have to say is important.

2. Remember That Confrontation Is Not a Dirty Word.

Once you determine that you are dealing with a true conflict, you need to communicate. Often, we don't want to confront; we want to avoid, and true conflict cannot be avoided. We struggle with confrontation primarily because we confuse it with fighting, anger, and unpleasantness.

Confrontation is not a dirty word. It comes from Latin, meaning, "to face." Properly defined, "to confront" means to face an issue instead of avoiding it. Yet, we often use the word "confrontational" in a negative

way. "She's so confrontational," we say, as if that's a bad thing. We often avoid conflicts that should be confronted, and the longer we wait, the harder it is to resolve them.

3. Get Objectivity.

If you've lost your objectivity about someone, try to get it back before you communicate. There are two parts of any conflict: the issue and the persons attached to the issue. Sometimes, when conflict has gone on for a while without being confronted, we start liking the other person less and less, losing our objectivity. Once we can no longer be objective about the person attached to the issue, it is difficult to effectively communicate through that issue.

How do you regain objectivity about the person attached to your conflict? Observe him or her. Note competences and positive attributes. Is he a good father? Does she donate time to charity? Try to get a more balanced view. If you can only think negative thoughts about the other person, those thoughts will guide your communication. Even if you choose the right words, the communication will fail, if your face says, "You make me sick."

4. Start on a Foundation of Sameness.

Instead of starting the communication with the conflict and why you're angry, start with something about which you do agree. Start with something you share. "We both have worked here a long time." "We both love our child." "Our friendship has helped us both through some difficult times." Then move to the issue causing the conflict. This is also helpful when you're trying to communicate with someone you don't like but who

works with you or is a member of your family or neighborhood.

By talking about common interests and goals (such as wanting to resolve this conflict), you can stay away from how you feel about the other person. When you start communicating with a negative, you may ignite immediate defensiveness and leave no positive or productive place for the communication to go. Start on a foundation of sameness, collaboration, and sincere desire to resolve the issue. You can do this with integrity, no matter how you feel about the person attached to the issue.

5. “Beat Up” Issues, Not the People Attached to the Issues.

If your goal is to resolve a conflict and change another’s behavior (what

a person does or doesn’t do) for the better, your communication has to address the behaviors. When we attack others, they are generally going to either attack back or retreat out of a real or perceived lack of power. Either way, the real issue will not be resolved because when we are attacked we cannot hear, nor do we focus on how we can change our behavior.

Calling someone lazy or a jerk or saying that he or she has a bad attitude will get you nowhere. Telling that person what he or she said or did that needs changing is the only chance you have to change that behavior. If your goal is to change behavior, communicate in behaviors.

Increasing the odds of resolving conflict requires good thinking and good communication. Think, confront

true conflicts only, choose your battles, and focus on the behaviors that need changing, not on the people attached to those behaviors. ■

Excerpted from *Why Did I Say That? Communicating to Keep Your Credibility, Your Cool, and Your Cash!*

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