

MANAGEMENT OUTLOOK

HOW TO RESOLVE CONFLICTS

This advice is aimed primarily at resolving differences between individuals, small groups and organisations, but many of the same principles apply to the resolution of conflict between communities and even nations.

Although the principles are listed separately, it is possible to use one followed by another or to use two or more at the same time. Regard this advice as a tool box - use whatever seems appropriate to your situation and, if one technique does not work, try another.

Be calm. Conflict usually engenders strong emotions and even anger but, in such a state, you are unlikely to be particularly rational or in the mood for compromise.

Always show respect. However much you disagree with someone, attack the argument, not the person. To use a sporting metaphor: play the ball, not the man. As Nelson Mandela explained in his autobiography "Long Walk To Freedom": "*I defeated my opponents without dishonouring them*".

Be magnanimous. In truth, most conflict is over matters of little substance and often it is mostly pride or status that is at stake. Consider conceding the point to your opponent. This will save you time and energy and you can concentrate on the important issues of difference rather than the smaller ones. Also, if your concession is done with good grace and even some

humour, it will disarm your opponent and make him/her look small-minded by comparison.

Discuss or debate. So often, conflict is created and/or maintained because there is no real discussion or debate. We make assumptions about the other person's point of view and willingness to compromise which might be quite wrong. We avoid discussion or debate either because we fear conflict (the situation will rarely be as bad as you fear) or we worry about 'losing' (in which case, you've already 'lost').

Apply rationality. Much conflict is not about substance but perception. Try to clear through the perception to discover and agree on how things really are. You won't manage this without discussion and you may need to research the facts and seek evidence. What is really worrying the other person? Has another person or company had a similar experience which might prove revealing and helpful?

Acknowledge emotions. Facts alone - however rational - cannot resolve much conflict because how people perceive those facts is coloured by their emotions. It's no good denying those emotions, so make an effort to see the situation the way the other person does and to acknowledge their emotions before endeavouring to move beyond them. One way of doing this is to use phrases such as "*Let me try to explain how I see things*" or "*Please allow me*

to explain why this is so important to me". Then reverse these points: "I would like to understand better how you see this situation" and "Please explain to me what is important to you in this problem".

Be aware of displacement. Especially where anger is concerned, sometimes the source of a conflict is not what it appears to be, as anger is displaced. In the domestic context, for instance, an argument about the washing up could in fact be an argument about lack of affection. It's not easy to spot displacement, but a warning sign is when matters that do not normally cause conflict now appear to do so.

Be precise. Someone might propose that something be done "sooner rather than later". His colleague might react against this assuming that we are talking of matter of weeks. When asked what exactly is meant, it might be that the first person explains that he had in mind a programme of several months - so, no argument. It might be necessary to make savings in the family budget. Instead of throwing everything into doubt and caused unnecessary upset, be focused. Perhaps it will be necessary to cancel some subscriptions or to postpone a planned holiday for a year.

Think creatively. Try presenting different types of solution from those so far rejected by one of the parties. For example, in the Sunningdale talks on the future of Northern Ireland in 1973, the British and Irish Governments both wanted their view on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland to be stated first in the agreement; the solution was to divide the page in two and present the two statements side by side, so that they both had equal status. In a particularly tough set of negotiations that I led as a national trade union official, I would not accept certain words in the proposed agreement but I allowed them to be used in the covering letter to the agreement.

Change the wording. It's amazing how often we disagree about words and how a change of words can change how people view a situation. Instead of criticising a work colleague for "a mistake", perhaps you could invite him to discuss "a learning opportunity". If two parties to a dispute don't like their eventual agreement to be called an agreement, try calling it a settlement or a resolution or a concordat.

Change the environment. It's no coincidence that some of the toughest political negotiations of all times - for instance those between the Israelis and the Palestinians - often take place in locations like Camp David in the USA or a wood in Scandinavia. I was a professional trade union official for 24 years and many of the most productive negotiations between management and union took place in a neutral venue like a hotel. Sometimes even simply moving from an office to a coffee bar or from a house to a restaurant can make all the difference.

Compromise. This is an obvious point but frequently neglected. If you can't agree on whether to see a romantic comedy or an action thriller at the cinema, see one film this weekend and the other the next weekend. If you can't agree on whether to have a city holiday or a beach holiday, try a two-centre break.

Consider staging. Much conflict is about change. Introducing change in stages often makes it more palatable to the person uncomfortable about it (and can make it more manageable for the person promoting it).

Consider sequencing. Much conflict is created and/or aggravated by lack of trust. Building trust takes time and proof of goodwill. So consider introducing an agreement in stages whereby each action is dependent on another action.

Experiment or test. Too often we argue in ignorance, convinced that our prescription or proposal is the best with no real evidence. Have a trial and review how things go or try two or three ways of doing something and have an honest appraisal of what works best.

Seek mediation. This is a process whereby a neutral third party consults with those involved in a conflict to see if the problem can be presented in a way which facilitates a resolution. The mediator may simply listen and ask questions or he/she may suggest other ways of looking at the problem or even possible solutions. Classically this is approach used in most relationship counselling.

Seek conciliation. This is a similar process to mediation but a little more activist on the part of the third party who will normally attempt to find a solution by proposing a 'third way'.

Seek arbitration. This is a process involving a third party who, from the beginning, is invited by the conflicting parties to propose a solution. The two parties may have originally agreed merely to consider the proposed solution (non-binding arbitration) or they may have agreed in advance to accept the decision of the arbitrator (binding arbitration). This approach is often used in industrial disputes.

If absolutely necessary, apply authority or force. If mediation, conciliation and arbitration do not work or the parties are not willing to try them, conflict can be resolved in a fashion by one party imposing his/her solution through authority (she is the parent or he is the line manager) or through force (calling in the police or obtaining a legal injunction). Such a 'settlement' will cause resentment in the party at the receiving end, but sometimes this is the only way to resolve a conflict and move on. I can tell you - as a former trade union negotiator - that sometimes people in conflict want someone to impose a solution, not because they themselves oppose the solution but because they do not want to lose 'face' or be seen by their constituents to have 'given in'.

If all else fails, wait. Most problems change over time. Either the problem solves itself because circumstances change or one's attitude to the problem changes as the heat dies down and other matters assume more prominence. Therefore, if one cannot solve a dispute and its resolution can wait, maybe the best approach is to leave things alone for a while.

Accept the situation. Conflict is not like mathematics. There is not always a solution waiting to be found and, if there is a solution, it is unlikely to be the only one. The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung once wrote that *"The greatest and most important problems of life are all fundamentally insoluble. They can never be solved but only outgrown."*

Finally, although this advice is about resolving conflict, be aware that conflict cannot always be avoided (especially when fundamental differences, as opposed to perceived differences, are involved) and not all conflict is negative (sometimes it 'clears the air'). The important thing is to keep wasteful and damaging conflict to a minimum and, when it does occur, use the relevant techniques to resolve or at least ease it.

The article is written by Mr. Roger Darlington (British columnist).