



UNIT-16

Conflict Resolution Techniques

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Find new and effective techniques for dealing with difficult people.

Unit 16

Conflict Resolution Techniques

Overview

The Importance of Empathy

We can do a lot to keep problems from happening in the first place. If you develop your empathizing skills, you can put yourself in the other person's shoes even though you do not have to agree with them. If you are practicing being empathetic (and we recommend that you do) you should avoid phrases like, "I agree" or, "Yes, that's true." Don't reinforce a concern, either. You can simply express your empathy by rephrasing the key topic of the person's statement.

Some phrases you might use include:

- "I hear..."
- "I understand..."
- "I think you're saying..."

The concept of rephrasing before answering gives you:

- A chance to empathize with the concerns
- An opportunity to show the person that you understand the concern
- A moment to think of an appropriate response

It's also important to check to be sure the individual is satisfied with your level of understanding or your explanation. Your ability to empathize will play an important role in your overall communication skills and your ability to foster a positive and productive environment.

Dangerous Misconceptions

Although we believe that we are being clear when we speak, we're not always being as efficient as we think. Here are some important misconceptions for you to keep in mind when you are having a conversation:

- People always pay attention when you are speaking to them.
- When people say they are paying attention, they really are.
- When someone says "I know", they really do.
- Saying something over and over will ensure that your listener understands.
- Saying something over and over, slowly or loudly, will be even more effective.

Getting Focused

Getting to the Heart of the Matter

Despite our best efforts and our good use of management techniques, our attempts can seem to be for nothing. Behaviors we thought we had influenced positively (or corrected altogether) can regress.

For example, you might have spoken with an employee about some below-par behavior: perhaps they are always late for work, despite the fact that they are supposed to be answering phones and greeting visitors promptly at 9:00 a.m. You've spoken with the employee, and although this will lead to improved behavior for a few days, he always slips back to being late. You've asked your human resources consultant to suspend the employee, and they have indicated that punishment is too harsh, despite your record keeping that shows how often and how bad this behavior is.

You've been braver than plenty of workplace leaders because you have discussed the problem with the employee and with HR. But somehow, the behavior continues, and you get a sense that you are not doing enough.

What's Missing?

You aren't getting to the heart of the problem. It's not enough to tell the individual that they are breaking the rules, or that a colleague has to cover their tasks when they are late. If it were enough, the behavior would stop.

Ask yourself what is really bothering you to get at what is really bothering *them*. Often the behavior touches a nerve that is much more personal. For example, if I hired the receptionist because he was the son of a friend, and I felt that he was taking advantage of my relationship with him and his parents by not caring about the schedule, that's at a much deeper level than just the rules that are being broken.

If the person is perpetually late because they do not set their alarm (and get up to it) because they really do not care about their job, or they feel underutilized, or they are being bullied by a co-worker and cannot drag themselves into the office, then we are getting at the root of the real problem.

If, as leaders, we are content to only deal with the surface issues, and we are afraid to dig and get at the deeper issues, we will not create a better workplace. We simply scrape the moss off of the surface, only to have it to grow back later.

The ability to peel an infraction back to its core takes patience and precision. Sometimes we don't do this because it can take time to uncover the real problem. We can often find ourselves in too much of a hurry to do this properly. At other times, our emotions get involved and we make the decision that we really don't want to go there, because we'll also have to deal with what is bothering us.

If you don't stop to think about the big picture, you'll end up either missing the problem, or going after too many problems at once. To stop yourself from being over-involved, you must be able to state the

problem in a single sentence. If you make it longer, your conversation will lose focus as soon as it starts.

The Three F's

To get to the heart of the problem, evaluate the 3 F's: **facts**, **frequency**, and **frustrated relationship**.

Facts

What are the facts of the issue? Create a list so that you do not get sidetracked while you plan your conversation. Don't drag in other stories or unrelated issues that have happened previously. If you are talking to someone about tardiness, then stick to that and leave things like poor report writing, gossiping, or not taking care of equipment out of the conversation.

Frequency

Make sure you have a very clear history of the frequency of the issue. In this case, how often is the individual late? How late are they?

Describe the pattern like this: "This is the second time that I've called this to your attention. You agreed it would not happen again. Now I am concerned that I cannot trust you to keep a promise."

Revealing that you notice a pattern brings the history to the forefront. The history is important because repeated frequency erodes your trust.

Frustrated Relationship

If your real concern is about the relationship, but you only focus on the pattern, then you are not likely to get the change that you are aiming for. You have to discuss what is important to you in terms of the relationship. Explain that when they repeatedly ignore your expectations to be on time, they aren't just demonstrating a lack of commitment to the job. They are eroding your trust in them, your trust in their ability to do their job, and the possibility of being trusted with assignments in the future.

Comments like the following can be helpful:

- I feel like I cannot trust you to get the work done.
- I feel like I am constantly nagging you and I don't like to do that.
- I feel like I can't trust you to keep the commitments you make.

Conflict Resolution Techniques

Conflict Resolution Model

The Three-Step Model

There are lots of models that can help us deal with difficult people and the conversations that come with them. They range from about three to eight steps, and our in-house trainer has scrutinized the best of them for you. We've found that you can be successful with any of the models provided that you apply all of the steps consistently. Leaving out steps can cause the conversations or the action plan to go off track.



Step 1: Research

We have covered the elements for Step One in Session Five.

Step 2: Presentation

This is where you will invite your difficult person into a conversation. In doing so, it is important to create a safe zone for the conversation to take place. A **safe zone** is a place where other people cannot eavesdrop on your conversation. (Tip: Use a meeting room if you do not have an office.) It is also a zone where you, as host, need to feel safe. If history says that this individual is unpredictable, you may want to have an HR consultant or union representative present.

It is important that any guests to the meeting are there to simply observe and take notes, and that the conversation is between only you and your difficult person if possible.

The safe zone is also about trust and respect. If there is no mutual respect between you and your difficult person, you may have to take time to establish a few rules at the beginning of the meeting. For example, “We will control our tempers and language during the conversation,” means that you start with an agreement to treat each other respectfully.

Next, you describe the **behavior gap** using the facts, frequency, and frustrated relationship language that you learned in Step 1.

Finally, you must **make it easy**. This may seem like a Zen statement and also bother some of you, but it is also the sign of a very competent leader. Make the conversation easy on them and make it easy for them to comply with your requests. If there are barriers to the difficult person improving, your job is to remove those barriers. If they are having trouble getting motivated, your job is to help them find the motivation within and work with it.

There is nothing helpful or noble if you make things harder for people, so take this step seriously. (You’ll see that it works great with teenagers, too, if you happen to have any!) Explore the barriers together. Ask the individual what they think they can do and what is possible. Don’t follow your natural tendency to tell them what to do or to give tasks they don’t want to someone else. The work still has to be done. Your role is to enable them to do it, and do it to the best of their ability.

Step 3: Take Action

In order to make sure the gap raised in your conversation gets dealt with, you will need to create an action plan. These action plans are no good without the difficult person’s agreement to deliver. You’ll also need to set up a follow up timetable (daily, weekly, or monthly check-ins) to make sure they have what they need and can deliver.

If the action plan is not followed to the letter, then you’ll know that it is time to take things to the next level. This might mean that you must start career-altering conversations with your difficult person. Those second-level conversations are rarely needed when you determine that your action plan is appropriate and that you and the difficult person had the tools to succeed.

Getting the Hang of Things

Test Your Knowledge

Consider your difficult person you identified in assignment 1. How could you use this plan to resolve the situation? (Focus on general ideas for now.)

Step Two

Step Three

Practice

Test Your Knowledge

Feedback Given

Feedback Received

Changing Yourself

Negative vs. Positive Interactions

Deep down, we already know that we cannot change other people. Fortunately, we do have control over our own thoughts, and we can change our reactions to other people to help improve those relationships. We also have the ability to influence other people’s behavior by reinforcing the behaviors we want repeated, and ignoring the ones that we don’t want repeated.

Negative Interaction

Do you ever experience negative interactions and wish that you were somewhere else?

- Manager: “Why can you never do the invoices the way I want them done?”
- Bookkeeper: “Because you keep changing your mind about how you want them done.”
- Manager: “No, it’s because you don’t listen to me.”

Positive Interaction

Take the reins and change the cycle!

- Manager: “Can you tell me why these invoices aren’t showing a due date on them?”
- Bookkeeper: “Because you keep changing your mind about how you want them done, and I wasn’t sure what you wanted.”
- Manager (Option One): “I hadn’t realized I’d been sending you mixed messages. What are the contradictory instructions I’ve given you?”
- Manager (Option Two): “When that happens, I’d like you to feel free to ask me and to get some clarification. Then you’ll know what to do, and I will be happy with the invoices.”

You are the one in the best position to change a negative cycle to a positive one, and you’ll find it an easier task when you start with a plan. Our spur of the moment reactions often don’t work out that well. You can use the three-step process as a guide any time you have a tough meeting coming up with an employee or with a client.

We’ve also got to be realistic. There is an old expression that says the best laid plans of mice and men (and managers) do not all turn out as well as we’d like.

Test Your Knowledge

When should you call for a time out?

When should you walk away from a conversation, or when should you decide “enough is enough” when you are considering employee performance?

Does this organization need a policy for dealing with those difficult people who heap verbal abuse on people, or do you have one already? If you have one already, is it used properly?

Dealing with Negative Feelings

Put yourself in charge of you.

Take a leaf out of Eleanor Roosevelt’s book and refuse to beat up on yourself or make yourself a victim in these situations.

Be proactive rather than reactive: notice what is going on around you, and when possible deal with potential problems right away. (For example, you can plan team meetings to ensure issues are addressed before they explode.)

Monitor your self-talk.

Become more aware of what you tell yourself both before and after dealing with a difficult situation. Remember the reality of how what we tell ourselves comes true, whether those messages are positive or negative.

Be in control.

Plan how you will handle the situation and visualize yourself feeling in control. After a situation has been handled, analyze it, learn from it, and then put it aside.

If you still feel angry after you have dealt with a situation, use that anger constructively to clean your

office, or let it propel you out the door for a walk.

Work on your sense of humor.

Research tells us that laughter is a proven method for dispelling stress and feeling better about the world. If things are getting heavy for you right now and you can't find much to laugh about, try renting a comedy or watching your favorite comedian.

Have a support team.

One of the most important things that you can do to deal with your negative feelings is to have a support group – people you can go to and just talk about how you feel. In your organization, do you feel you have that kind of support? Do all staff have that kind of support? (This is very different from gossiping; confidentiality is a big factor here.)

However great your support system is at home, others will rarely be able to understand just how you feel as well as someone who is working within the same culture and walking in a similar pair of shoes. Part of your action plan for the end of today may be to work with others to create a safe haven (a partner or confidante or some other support mechanism) where you can let off steam and pent up emotion.

Why Don't People Do What They Are Supposed To?

How many times have you thought or said, "Why can't you just do what you're supposed to?" Here's a list of possible answers to your question:

- They didn't know why they should do it
- They didn't know when to begin and end it.
- They didn't know what they were supposed to do.
- They didn't know how to do it.
- They thought they were doing it.
- They thought your way wouldn't work or that their way was best.
- They thought something else was more important.
- They aren't rewarded for doing it, or they aren't punished for not doing it.
- They are rewarded for not doing it, or they are punished for doing it.
- They didn't think they could do it.

While this list was originally compiled by a survey conducted with 4,000 employees and managers with various occupations in a wide variety of industries, the results are borne out repeatedly through repeated surveys and employee engagement data.

(Source: Ferdinand F. Fournies, *Why Employees Don't Do What They're Supposed to Do and What to Do About It*)

Remember that everyone is motivated, but that each of us are motivated by things that have value to us personally. This means some of the people your work with may be motivated by the same things that you are, but other people won't be.

De-Stress Options to Use When Things Get Ugly

Belly Breathing

Loosen your clothes, close your eyes, mentally relax your body, and take ten or more deep breaths. Each time you exhale, count silently: “one,” after the first breath, “two,” after the second breath, etc., up to at least ten. If you lose count, or find yourself working on thoughts as they pass through your mind, start your count over again. When you are finished, you should feel more calm and relaxed. (Your blood pressure will go down temporarily, too.)

Visualize

Use positive imagery to boost your confidence. Couple this with positive language for even better results. Use positive imagery and self-talk to see yourself performing well at whatever challenge you are having. Negative words and images can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Music

Music has the power to soothe or to give us energy. It also has healing power. Find a type of music that relaxes you, and play it when you need to calm down. When you feel tired and listless, play some rousing music (rather than drinking caffeine), to give you a pick up.

Acupressure and Massage

Holding a fingertip to the point of most pain or tension and pressing very hard into the offending muscle for up to a minute can avert a headache or relieve tension. Have a friend or spouse learn how to do massage therapy and/or acupressure on tense muscles, since daily treatment is better than once or twice a month.

If no one at home is available to help, have a look at your benefits plan. Many plans include this type of treatment because they realize the long term benefits that are gained in terms of wellness.

Laughter

Laughter is the best medicine of all. A good belly laugh can lower blood pressure, slow your adrenaline, and reverse the stomach acid that comes with negative responses. Be on the lookout for jokes and cartoons you can share with family and friends. During a meeting with your difficult person, you may find that humor helps to defuse the situation; laugh at yourself (not the other person, which is insulting).

General Coping Thoughts When Things Get Messy

- Take a deep breath and relax.
- Tell yourself that getting upset won't help. Tell yourself repeatedly if it doesn't work the first time. The broken record technique works on you, too.
- Remind yourself that just as long as you keep your cool, you're in control.
- I'm not going to let them get to me.
- I can't change them with anger; I'll just upset myself.
- I can find a way to say what I want to without anger.
- Stay calm – no sarcasm, no attacks, no judgments.

- I can stay calm and relaxed.
 - No one is right, no one is wrong. We just have different needs.
 - No matter what is said, I know I'm a good person.
 - I'll stay rational; anger won't solve anything.
 - Let them look all foolish and upset. I can stay cool and calm.
 - His/her opinion isn't important. I won't be pushed into losing my cool.
 - Take a time-out. Cool off, then come back and deal with it.
 - Some situations don't have good solutions. Looks like this is one of them. No use getting all bent out of shape about it.
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- It's just a hassle. Nothing more, nothing less. I can cope with hassles.
 - I'm getting better at this anger management stuff.
 - I got angry, but kept the lid on saying things I'd regret. That's progress.
 - If they want me to get angry, I'm going to disappoint them.
 - I can't expect people to act the way I want them to.
 - I don't have to take this so seriously.

Further Reading: