Conflict Resolution

Conflict is a normal, natural part of human relationships. People will not agree about everything all the time. In and of itself, conflict is not necessarily a negative thing. When handled constructively it can help people to stand up for themselves and others, and work together to achieve a mutually satisfactory solution. But if conflict is handled poorly it can cause anger, hurt, divisiveness and more serious problems. This guide discusses how to deal with conflict in a constructive manner.

Sources of Conflict

There can be many causes or reasons for conflict. However, some of the most common include:

- **Personal differences** such as values, ethics, personalities, age, education, gender, social and economic status, cultural background, temperament, health, religion, political beliefs, etc.

- **A clash of ideas, choices, or actions.** For instance, conflict can occur when people have incompatible goals, when they are in direct competition, or even when they have different work styles.

- Finally, **poor communication** or miscommunication is one of the biggest causes of conflict.

Preventing Conflict

While it isn't possible to prevent all conflict, there are steps that you can take to try to keep conflict to a minimum. One way to manage conflict is to prevent it from occurring in the first place. Preventing conflict is not the same as avoiding conflict. Preventing conflict means behaving and communicating in a way that averts needless conflicts.

Consider the following tips:

- **Respect differences**. Many conflicts arise from differences in gender, generations, cultures, values, etc. We live in an increasingly diverse world. Learn to respect and celebrate peoples' differences and their opinions.

- **Treat others as you'd like to be treated**. Regardless of your personal opinion of someone, be professional, courteous, respectful, and tolerant, even when you're frustrated. If a person treats you disrespectfully, calmly tell them you do not appreciate it. Do not exacerbate the situation by retaliating with inappropriate behavior or comments.

- **Keep negative opinions to yourself**—Most people are put off by hearing negative comments about others—especially if it's about personal issue. In the workplace, this may lead to disciplinary action. Friends and acquaintances may be equally "turned off" by negative comments about someone, particularly if they feel they are being drawn into a conflict or being asked to take sides. If you need to vent about a personal issue, do so outside of the workplace, keep it to a close, trusted friend or a loved one and keep it to a minimum.

- **Keep your distance**—Unfortunately, this is often easier said than done. Often the conflicts arise with those who are closest to us. It is often easier to get along if you respect one another's privacy and boundaries. Taking a break from each other can go along way in keeping the peace.

Resolving Conflict

Sometimes, conflict cannot—or should not—be avoided. Knowing how to deal with conflict is important for anyone. However, often people have not been given the tools to effectively deal with conflict. Consider the following tips:

- **Address the issue early**. The longer you let an issue fester, the more time you waste and the greater chance you have of it spiraling into other problems.

- **Address the issue privately.** Set up a time to talk in a private place, where you won't be overheard or interrupted. Speak to the person with whom you have the conflict and try to resolve the issue one-on-one before involving others.

- **Expect discomfort**. You may have to say up front: "Although this is uncomfortable for me, if I don't address this, I'm afraid we will not meet our goal."

- **Be specific and objective**. Identify the specific issue at hand and the effect it is having. Avoid generalizing statements such as "always," "ever" or "never." Stick to the subject; try not to digress into broad personality issues or revive past issues.

- **Focus on the outcome**. Don't dwell on problems or blame. Keep the spotlight on finding solutions and how you will reach the desired outcomes. "In order to reach the goal of X, I think we need to do Y."

- **Be open**. Doing so establishes an atmosphere of mutual respect and cooperation. Listen to and consider others' opinions, points of view and ideas. Understand and appreciate that they think differently than you and may bring a greater, or different, understanding to the table that will help resolve the problem more quickly and effectively.

- **Respond constructively.** Let the other person know you value what he or she is saying, even if you don't agree. Try to avoid responding negatively or directively, for example criticizing, ridiculing, dismissing, diverting (talking about yourself rather than about what the other person has said) or rejecting the other person or what they are saying.

- **Know your triggers**. Learn to recognize your personal warning signs for anger and figure out the ways that work for best for you to constructively control your anger.

- **Maintain a sense of humor.** Be willing to laugh, including at yourself. Maintaining a sense of humor can relieve stress and tension, and help get you and others through a difficult time .

- **Learn to compromise.** Compromise is important in any relationship. If you disagree on an issue, discuss the problem calmly, allow each person to explain his or her point of view, and look for ways to meet each other in the middle.

- **Don't attempt to resolve conflict when tempers are flaring.** During an argument, often no one can agree on a reasonable solution. If that is the case, agree to take a break and come back to the problem later, when you have had time to settle down and think about the issue.

- **Know when to retreat**. The conflict resolution process will not always work. The level of the skills of some people may not be at the point where they can be full partners in this process. For example, you may have a spouse who does not want to, or know how to, solve the problem. You may also have a conflict with a co-worker, boss or higher-up who is known for irrational outbursts. You must take all these factors into consideration and know when it may be more appropriate for you to cut your losses and retreat.

- **Practice forgiveness.** There may be times when someone makes a mistake or says or does something hurtful—whether intentionally or unintentionally. While it's okay to be angry, it's also important to let go of the anger and move on. On a personal level, it is healthier to let go of negative emotions like stress and anger. And it's difficult to maintain a good relationship if you can't get past these feelings.

Mutual Conflict Resolution

In most cases you should be able to resolve conflicts by working with others involved. Here are some steps to consider:

- **Step One**: Identify the purpose and importance of the conflict—and your mutual desire to solve it.

- **Step Two**: Takes turns listening to each other's side. This is a very important step and one that requires good listening skills.

- **Step Three**: Once all the issues are discussed, repeat and summarize what was said. It may help to write this down or even create "minutes" to document issues discussed.

- **Step Four**: Ask questions as needed and encourage others to do the same. Do you understand their point of view? Are you sure they understand yours? Clarify as needed.

- **Step Five**: No matter how intense the conflict, you should always find issues or points that you agree upon: For instance, "we agree our goal is to increase sales by 10 percent this year." Or, "we agree that we need to cut our household costs, we just don't agree on what costs we can cut."

- **Step Six**: Next, list ALL Solutions—even those that may seem unrealistic, unreasonable, or wrong.

- **Step Seven**: Review all the possible solutions and highligh those you find mutually acceptable. Hopefully you will have at least one or two that you agree upon.

- **Step Eight**: Choose the one (or few) that you agree will work best.

- **Step Nine**: Put a plan into action. What steps will you take to implement? How will you review progress?

By creating step-by-step guidelines and mutually agreed upon solutions and action plans, you should be able to minimize conflict and achieve desired goals.

Dealing Constructively with Anger

Conflict can result in anger. Anger is a normal human emotion ranging from annoyance to absolute rage. Each person's anger "triggers" are different, some may get angry at a friend's behavior, other causes of anger can be more serious—such as personal problems or a previous traumatic experience.

In and of itself, anger is not necessarily a problem—when focused appropriately it can help people to stand up for themselves and others. But if anger is channeled in negative, inappropriate ways it can cause problems. Consider the following ideas to help deal constructively with anger:

- Anger is a strong emotion, and isn't always easy to control. Two crucial skills in managing anger are self-awareness and self-control. Try to recognize and identify your feelings, especially anger. Once the feeling is identified you can then think about the appropriate response.

  – **Self-awareness** is being conscious of thoughts and feelings. Examine how and why you are feeling angry to better understand and manage these feelings. For example, ask yourself questions such as "why am I angry?" or "What is making me feel this way?" to assist in self-analysis. Learn to recognize your personal warning signs for anger.

- **Self-control** means stopping and considering actions before taking them. Learn to stop and think before you act or speak in anger. For exam- ple, envision a stop sign when you are angry—and to take the time to think about how to react. Explore techniques to calm down such as counting backwards from ten to one, deep breathing, or just walking away.

- **Relax.** Try relaxation exercises, such as breathing deeply from the diaphragm (the belly, not the chest) and slowly repeating a calming word or phrase like "take it easy." Or to think of relaxing experiences, such as sitting on a beach or walking through a forest.

- **Think positively.** Remind yourself that no one is out to get you, you are just experiencing some of the rough spots of daily life.

- **Problem-solve**. Identify the specific problem that is causing the anger and approach it head-on—even if the problem does not have a quick solution.

- **Communicate with others.** Angry people tend to jump to conclusions and speak without thinking about the consequences of what they are saying. Slow down and think carefully about what you want to say. Listen carefully to what the other person is saying.

- **Manage stress.** Set aside personal time to deal with the daily stresses of work, activities, and family. Ideas include: listening to music, writing in a journal, exercising, meditating, or talking about your feelings with someone you trust.

- **Change the scene**. A change of environment may help reduce angry feelings. For example, if your co-workers or friends are angry frequently and/or make you angry, consider spending time with people who may contribute more to your self-confidence and well-being.

- **Find a distraction.** If you can't seem to let your anger go, it can help to do something distracting, for example, read or watch television or a movie

- **Set a good example.** If you are teaching your child to control their anger, make sure you practice what you preach. Show by example how you manage your own anger.

When to Seek Help

There may be times when, despite your best efforts, you may not be able to resolve a conflict on your own. If so, get help.

If the conflict is work-related, you may need to speak to your manager or human resources department, particularly if the situation is affecting your work or impeding your chances of achieving goals.

In any conflict, if the conflict is is so severe that it's leading to serious relationship problems, or creates a danger of physical harm and/or emotional or psychological damage, seek immediate help. Consider the following sources of assistance:

- Your employee assistance program (EAP)

- Medical practitioner

- Mental health professionals, such as psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, or mental health counselors, etc.

- Community mental health resources