

Structuring Conversations for Resolution

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Fall 2004, FLOURISH

With every encounter, there is potential for conflict. We all come from unique sets of experiences, cultural and familial backgrounds, and individual preferences and priorities. When those matchless sets of collective life experiences collide, a myriad of opportunities exist for differences to erupt and for relationships to suffer.

Exorbitant amounts of time and money are spent on developing communication skills and strategies to improve human interaction. While critical for success, these tools can still fall short of their goal. So, what's missing?

Behind every conflict, there is hurt. Something has triggered a "hot button" that evokes a memory or perception from the past. That perception quickly leads to some emotional reaction, oftentimes anger. The anger, in turn, stimulates some outward behavior. A harsh word, a look of disapproval, or a curt tone of voice can all represent signs of conflict. Underlying that visible exchange of behavior is typically some personal unmet need.

Author and conflict specialist Dr. Dan Dana* identified five critical needs (or underlying emotional interests) as central to every conflict among individuals:

The need for...

- ❖ Approval...
- ❖ Inclusion...
- ❖ Identity...
- ❖ Justice...
- ❖ Power....

So, stop and think about a conflict you've recently experienced...what went on in the conflict? Where did you feel denied, wronged, or attacked? What need is not getting met that serves to only fuel the fire?

In the heat of conflict, we seldom have our wits about us. Our choices of behavior frequently trigger another round of retaliation. Whether at home, at work, or in our communities, unresolved conflict can be costly and sometimes deadly. Even with sophisticated communications training, differences between people escalate. Camps form, productivity drops, absenteeism increases, team work flounders, and good people leave (or are terminated from) their jobs or end their relationships.

Why do differences escalate even when attempts to communicate are made? Usually, the answer lies in whether or not unmet needs are addressed in the conflict exchange. Separating the problem from the people is critical for conflict to be resolved. Bridging the gap in perception and shifting the focus from “me against you” to “us against the problem” is grounded in whether or not the parties explore what is important to them about the conflict. And, the ability to reframe the conflict into a business (or family or community) problem is essential in creating a climate in which the parties feel they can engage.

What is quickly emerging as a tool of choice for people AND organizations is MEDIATION. People oftentimes remain in conflict simply because they haven't remained face to face long enough without distraction to come up with solutions. Facilitative mediation provides that opportunity through structured and strategic dialogue. The trained mediator, internal or external to organizations, structures the process, manages the emotional climate, assists the parties through critical content, and facilitates future-oriented action plans.

Generating solutions is empowering and leads to much greater self-satisfaction and follow-through than other forms of conflict resolution such as arbitration and litigation. Mediation embodies a whole-person centered approach, achieving individual self-respect while maintaining important relationships.

Applying mediation practices to human differences early or late in the stages of conflict can save organizations substantial amounts of time, money, and good employees. Facilitative mediation for workplace issues represents one of the most important tools and investments for today's organizations and tomorrow's growth.

So what can you do? Here are five tips for managing differences:

- ✓ Recognize that triggering events, or hot buttons, exist.
- ✓ Understand that conflict escalates when underlying interests go unmet.
- ✓ When ignored or left unmanaged, conflict behaviors perpetuate a repeating retaliatory cycle.
- ✓ Unresolved conflict between people creates business problems.
- ✓ Facilitative mediation restores balance, relationships, and generates future-oriented action plans for further growth and development.

By-Line:

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Debra Dupree, Director of The PULSE Institute, Inc. – *People Using Language Skills Effectively*, promotes the resolution of conflict...one conversation at a time...through training, coaching, facilitation, and mediation. Debra holds a MA in Counseling Psychology, is a Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, and serves as a Panel Mediator for Lumetra (Medicare), Peninsula Mediation (Department of Navy), and EEOC. She actively teaches professional development for mediators and facilitators as well as team building, diversity and conflict resolution strategies for all employees and managers. Drawing upon her collaborative nature and effectiveness in facilitating sensible solutions, Debra magically transforms employee and organizational issues into strategic opportunities for change.

*Author Dr. Daniel Dana:

Managing Differences: how to build better relationships at work and home, 2nd Edition, MTI Publications, 1999

Conflict Resolution: mediation tools for everyday worklife, McGraw-Hill, 2001