

Keeping In Touch

February 2004

The Village Employee Assistance Program

Making Conflict Work For You

Conflict is a part of every job. Even the most competent, intelligent, ethical people will disagree from time to time. In their book, *Communicating at Work*, Ronald Adler and Jeanne Marquardt Elmhorst, equate conflict with the common cold — unavoidable, unpleasant and counterproductive. With the right approach, however, conflict can produce good results. When faced with a conflict, you have several choices about how to respond. Each of these approaches has different results.

Avoiding: One way to deal with conflict is to avoid it whenever possible and to withdraw when confronted. Avoidance may have the short-term benefit of preventing a confrontation, but there are usually long-term costs, you lose self-respect, you become frustrated, and the problem may only get worse. However, sometimes avoidance is a legitimate option. Consider avoiding:

- When an issue is genuinely trivial, or when more important issues are pressing.
- When you have no chance of winning.
- When the potential for disruption outweighs the benefits of resolution.
- To let others cool down and regain perspective.
- When the long-term costs of winning may outweigh short-term gains.
- When others can resolve the conflict more effectively.



Accommodating: Whereas avoiders stay away from conflict, accommodators give ground as a way of maintaining harmony. Accommodating can be equivalent to appeasement, sacrificing one's principles and putting harmony above dealing with important issues. It can also be useful in some situations. Consider accommodating:

- When you find out you are wrong.
- When the issue is more important to the other party than to you.
- To build social credits for later issues.
- When harmony and stability are more important than the subject at hand.
- To allow others to learn through their own mistakes.

Competing: A competitive approach to conflict is based on the assumption that the only way for one party to reach its goals is to overcome the other. In many cases, a competitive approach is unnecessary. It often is possible for both sides in a conflict to reach their goals. Despite its drawbacks, competition isn't always a bad approach. Consider competing:

- In emergencies when quick, decisive action is vital.
- On important issues where unpopular actions need implementing.
- When others will take advantage of your competitive behavior.

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Teaching Children to Resolve Conflict

A child's ability to get what he or she wants in an acceptable manner is directly related to the number of solutions or alternatives the child can think of. A child who can think of five ways to get what he wants will generally display more socially acceptable behavior than the child who can think of only one or two ways. So, the key in helping our children resolve conflict is to help them generate alternatives.

Generating ideas for solutions is much easier for children when they have a clear goal. Help children define the problem in terms of what both children want to happen. For example, "What can you do so you have room to play with blocks and Casey has room to drive his truck?" When the problem is phrased this way, children get the idea that the needs of both are important.

Adults can also act like a "blackboard." When children suggest alternatives, adults can repeat the ideas then ask them what else could be done. Resist the temptation to suggest ideas as most children might assume their own thoughts are not good enough. If a child needs new ideas, suggest them later or ask the child to imagine how someone else they know might handle the situation.

"Keeping in Touch" is a monthly publication provided to employees covered by The Village Employee Assistance Program (EAP) through their employer's benefit package. If you have questions about your EAP benefit, or if you would like to access services, call

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Collaborating: Collaborative communicators are committed to working together to resolve conflicts. Collaboration assumes that conflict is a natural part of life and that working with the other person will produce the best results. The benefits of collaboration are clear; not only can the issue at hand be resolved, but the relationship between the parties is improved. Despite its advantages, collaborative communication isn't a panacea. Since it takes time to work with others, and collaboration requires that all parties are willing to work together, mutually satisfactory outcomes aren't always possible.

Consider collaborating:

- To find solutions when both parties' concerns are too important to be compromised.
- When a long-term relationship between the parties is important.
- To gain commitment of all parties by building consensus.
- When the other party is willing to take a collaborative approach.

Compromising: In a compromise, each party sacrifices something he or she is seeking to gain an agreement. Compromise is a middle-range approach. It is more assertive than avoiding and accommodating, yet less aggressive than competing. It is cooperative yet less so than collaboration. Consider compromising:

- When goals are important but not worth the effort or potential disruption of more assertive modes.
- When opponents with equal power are committed to mutually exclusive goals.



- To achieve temporary settlements of complex issues.
- To arrive at expedient solutions under time pressure.
- As a backup, when collaboration is unsuccessful.

When the time comes to deliver your message, try to speak with your mind rather than your emotions. Pinpoint the specific behavior you want to discuss. Avoid accusations or mind reading about the other person's motives, both of which provoke defensiveness even when they are correct.

Finally, the most important part of dealing with conflict is to listen to the other person's viewpoint. Stephen Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, encourages people to listen first to understand, not to be understood. If you truly try to understand the other person's perspective and viewpoint, you'll be much more successful in resolving conflict.

Counselor Column

Question: *I have a co-worker who gets really defensive when somebody points out a mistake that she made. Nobody is upset with her for her mistakes, we just like to point them out and show her how she can do things differently the next time. She interprets it as a personal attack. How can we get her to understand that we're just trying to help her, not point fingers at her?*

Nancy Mykleseth, MSW, LCSW: While we may feel that we are pointing out a mistake, the other person may take it as criticism. Most of us don't like to realize that we have made a mistake, especially one that is brought to our attention. Something to consider is that we don't know what the other person's experience is with criticism. People may believe that any cor-

rection or pointing out of mistakes is a critique of who they are as a person. They may feel that they have been found lacking or have not measured up to their own standards.

As coworkers, we do have a responsibility to be honest with each other, yet at the same time be cautious when dealing with things that need to be improved. Think about whether the issue is within the realm of our concern. Are the corrections necessary for providing quality service or for the functioning of our work environment? Or is it something that annoys us and we would like the person to make some changes?

Since we will all be on the giving and receiving end of correction and criticism, it is helpful to be prepared.

Some suggestions:

- Separate judgment of the person from criticism. Effective criticism does not pass judgment on a person or attempt to characterize the person as wrong or bad.
- Critique the error and not the person. Identify the mistake and provide a concrete description of how you think the changes could be made.
- If somebody does point out an area for improvement, don't make an overall negative assessment about your character or ability.
- Lower your emotional reaction and use positive self-talk when dealing with criticism.
- Don't automatically assume the critic is right or wrong. Take time to assess the validity of the criticism.