

Turning conflict into opportunity



Conflict is inevitable. It doesn't matter how much we try and avoid it – conflict will happen. Conflict is inevitable because we are all different and sometimes our differences clash.

Conflict is an interesting thing. Most people say they don't want it, some people seem to love it (to satisfy their egos' needs for being right) and some find it entertaining (especially when it happens to others). Television wouldn't be half as interesting without conflict. Conflict makes life interesting.

Psychologist Ken Cloke has said, "Conflicts are laden with information that is essential for our growth, learning, intimacy and change." What a powerful statement this is. It challenges us to consider how we embrace conflict and the attitude we have to it.

When we meet conflict with fear and insecurity we usually find ourselves in an oppositional or adversarial mode. This creates a dynamic that prevents us from being able to resolve things; instead we seek to win at the expense of the other party (whom we determine will lose). This often sets us up to achieve the thing we feared at the beginning!

The adversarial way of dealing with conflict precludes us from growth, learning, intimacy and change. Unfortunately this is the dominant system of dealing with conflict in our society. We find it in our government, our courts (predominantly) and it is at the heart of family breakdowns and societal dysfunction. 'Fighting it out' leads to one side seeking to dominate and disempower the other. Intimidation, bullying, manipulation, isolation and undermining the opposition are tools of this adversarial way. Sadly, when one side does win, the other side usually harbours resentments that resurface later.

Conflict resolution is quite a different means of dealing with conflict. In this system, parties seek to have dialogue and create deeper understanding of the needs, values and concerns of the other party. This is the path to transformation of the conflict.


There are four things needed to resolve conflict:

Firstly, the parties involved need to have a genuine desire and commitment to do so. There is little chance of resolving conflict if one party is unwilling and stubbornly holds their position. Some people are unwilling to resolve issues. They enjoy being oppositional and they have to be right.

Secondly, to resolve conflict respect needs to be maintained. It is from a position of being respected that people are often more willing to seek to understand others and to make the concessions necessary for resolution. Showing disrespect is the tool of adversarial systems.

Thirdly, parties need to assertively articulate their specific needs and concerns. Assertive communication is open and honest, 'putting one's cards on the table' and explaining one's needs and concerns fairly. In adversarial systems, aggression is the most favoured way of being. Parties seek to be dominant and it is unwise to put one's cards on the table; therefore holding back information, deception and game playing become the way of communicating.

Fourthly, parties need to genuinely seek to listen and understand. When we really listen to where people are coming from, we often hear the echo of our own human hearts. Listening is essential for conflict resolution. In adversarial systems listening is considered a weakness. Parties hear what they want to hear and use any means to misinterpret and then oppose the other side.



Organisationally there are some important things that can be implemented to help resolve conflicts.

- Having clear organisational values helps people to align to common ways of doing things. What do we value as an organisation? What is important to us as a group of people? How then can we behave in order to uphold and display those values? What behaviours might undermine those values? What behaviours do we agree are OK and not OK?
- Sometimes organisational conflict happens because we do not share common values. People create opposing goals and there is a lack of alignment. This creates an environment of incompatibility and factions develop that oppose or disrespect the goals of others. This is what makes things dysfunctional.
- Having clear policies about behaviour and ways to resolve conflict is also important. Complaints procedures need to include informal and formal systems to resolve issues. Unless there are clear policies around behaviour and dealing with problems people may turn to less constructive means.
- It is also important to develop roles and resources for conflict resolution. Training people in mediative and facilitative processes or having external support people who can bring those functions to the organisation may be very helpful. It means that conflicts can be resolved before they develop into polarised battles.
- The heart of conflict resolution is the desire to work together in cooperative ways. We can welcome difference and diversity because it makes us richer. We can trust one another because we are clear about achieving our common goals and upholding our common values. This is the way to turn conflict into opportunity.

Helpful tips to resolve a conflict

1. **Consider what you are in conflict about.** What are the real issues you are in conflict over?
2. **Imagine what issues the other person may have.** Be careful not to make assumptions or jump to conclusions, but remain open to learn and understand.
3. **Consider what your core needs and concerns are.** Why is this a conflict to you? What's at stake for you? Can your needs be met a different way? Consider the other person's likely needs as well.
4. **Ask the other person if they are open to discussing the conflict with the aim of gaining a resolution that will be mutually acceptable.** Agree on a time or place that will be suitable.
5. **Describe your issues, needs and concerns assertively.** Talk in a manner that is respectful and non-threatening. Talk to gain understanding. Allow each other to talk without interruption.
6. **Listen to understand.** Listen to understand what the other person's needs and concerns are. Listen for their values and commitments.
7. **Clarify and give feedback to ensure you both understand each other.**
8. **Consider possible solutions.** Be creative and open to something that you may not have considered.
9. **Get to an agreement.** Agreements annul conflicts. Agreements can be on various levels: agreements to a solution; agreements to a compromise; agreements to give things time; agreements to get someone else involved etc. People can even agree to disagree, although with the ongoing stipulation of maintaining respect toward each other.