

RESOLVING CONFLICTS THROUGH COMMUNICATION



**Mayland Community College
Soar Program
2004**

Once a human being has arrived on this earth, communication is the largest single factor determining what kinds of relationships she or he makes with others and what happens to each in the world.

Virginia Satir

Understanding Conflict

Conflict is a normal part of life. It leads to change and resolves problems. You can use conflict to your advantage to improve relationships, form better work teams, learn to get along better with people, communicate more effectively, etc.

Conflict is a means by which you grow and learn. When handled properly, the results can be positive and life-changing. Anyone can learn how to resolve conflicts.

In this module, you will learn skills that will serve you throughout life. Make this an active learning process. Think up problem situations of your own and use them in the exercises, then apply the techniques to resolve them. The more you practice these skills, the better you will be at solving any problems that come your way.

The Basic Components of Conflict

- 1. Your attitudes and beliefs.*
- 2. When the conflict occurs.*
- 3. Your response to the conflict.*
- 4. The results of the conflict.*

1. **Your attitudes and beliefs** - These are the childhood messages you received about conflict from parents, teachers, and friends, along with attitudes presented by TV, movies, etc. These attitudes and beliefs affect how you respond when conflict occurs.

Briefly state your attitude or beliefs about conflict in the space below:

2. **When conflict occurs** - When do you find the most conflict occurring in your life? Is it with a particular person? At home or on the job? In school?

3. **Your response to conflict** - What do you normally do in a conflict situation? How do you react? What do you say? Do you face the conflict or run?

4. **The result of conflict** - What normally happens as a result of the conflict? How do you feel after? How do others feel? Is the conflict resolved or worsened?

Recognize Your Response Pattern

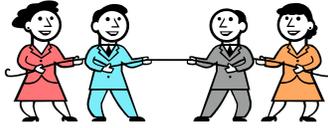
It is important to recognize how you typically handle conflict with different people in your life. For example, how do you typically behave in a conflict situation with your...

Friend(s): _____
Spouse/partner: _____
Parents: _____
Children: _____
Boss/co-workers: _____
Other: _____

You probably realize now that you handle conflict differently with different people. Can you think of any reasons why?

Be Aware of Your Behavior

Think of a conflict situation that has occurred in your life recently. How did you respond? Did you feel compelled to argue, fight, or defend your position? Did you retreat, give in, feel helpless, or feel like a victim? Did you avoid or hide from the conflict?



Be Willing to Change

To resolve conflicts, it is important to know that you, not the other person, must change. You must be willing to try new approaches or change attitudes, behaviors, or beliefs that do not help you.

What is one attitude, belief, or behavior you would like to change in order to be able and willing to handle the conflicts you are currently facing?

How do you plan to make this change?

Be Willing to Learn New Skills

Resolving conflict takes skill. Some of these skills you have, and some you may need to learn. The goal is to learn the strategies and approaches used by successful problem-solvers and mediators. In the list below, check off the skills you would like to develop further to enable you to handle and resolve conflict better.

- The ability to express your feelings in a non-threatening way.
- The ability to be assertive/to stand up for your rights.
- The ability to hear another person's viewpoint without objecting or needing to express your own.
- The ability to listen to what others have to say.
- The ability to not let other's opinions or behaviors decide your own opinions or behaviors.
- The ability to express your needs and wants.
- The ability to make a request without feeling guilty, angry, or upset.
- The ability to express needs without whining, complaining or nagging.
- The ability to change your opinion or belief when you are wrong.
- The ability to acknowledge when you have made a mistake.

Put a check mark (✓) next to those skills which you need help in developing further.

We first make our habits, and then our habits make us.



Your Conflict Style

Each of us has a style of dealing with conflict. Which of the following styles best describes the way you typically deal with conflict and the result?

___ **Avoidance Style:** You deny or avoid conflict, run from it, hold in your feelings, pretend there is no conflict.

Result: You may feel frustrated, angry, bitter, depressed, conflicted, confused, etc.

___ **Accommodation Style:** You agree and go along with others because it's easier; you smooth over situations; you adjust your opinions or feelings rather than risk a conflict.

Result: You may feel used, weak, overpowered, unimportant, victimized, etc.

___ **Confrontation Style:** You approach conflicts as a win-lose proposition, believing that only one person can win and the other must lose; you state your own feelings and opinions while disagreeing with the other person's side of it; you tend to become aggressive; you accuse and blame, point out faults, call names, criticize, yell, scream, or threaten.

Result: You may feel angry, frustrated, irritated, disgusted, guilty, nervous, depressed, etc.

___ **Problem-Solving Style:** You want both parties to win; you work toward a compromise or an agreement; you find ways to meet the needs of both parties and work toward a mutual solution.

Result: You may feel empowered, satisfied, calm, in control, etc.

Exercise: What are the typical results of your chosen style? (What does it do for you? Are you satisfied with it?)

Is there another style you would prefer to use? Why?



Conflict and Communication in Relationships

Conflict is sometimes unavoidable in relationships. Conflict alerts us to the need for communication and problem solving. Using good communication skills to resolve conflict, as opposed to angry confrontation, blaming or violence, is a much more effective approach.

Communication is the process of exchanging information and feelings. It affords us the opportunity to express our viewpoint, share our assumptions, and inquire into the other person's mode of thinking. Good communication skills are essential in resolving conflict because they increase understanding and reduce the risk of jumping to conclusions or making generalizations. It is important to understand first the sources of most conflict in relationships.

Sources of Conflict in Relationships

Behavior - when people's behaviors create negative feelings in you, or vice versa, this sets the stage for conflict.

Values - what we believe to be morally right, important, and true may differ from what other people believe. Having tolerance for other people's values and beliefs, without compromising or changing your own, is a good way to avoid many conflict situations.

Perceptions - the mind's way of shaping or making sense of what we see and hear is not the same for every person. In fact, most people have very different perceptions about even the most basic things. Rather than regarding differences in perception as problems, try to appreciate them as adding uniqueness and variety to life.

Assumptions - judgments or statements that are accepted as true without proof of demonstration often lead to trouble. Before you make an assumption about a person or situation, test the truth behind it.

Stereotypes - assumptions shared widely by many people about a group of people based on one single characteristic or behavior of some members of that group can be misleading and unfair. As with assumptions, it is important to test the truth of a stereotype and look for exceptions to it.

When we are aware of our own and other's values, perceptions, assumptions, and stereotypes, we can appreciate the role they play in conflict situations.

Exercise:

Think of a situation in your life in which one of your behaviors, values, perceptions, assumptions, or stereotypes created a conflict for you. What lesson did you or could you learn in this situation?



Keys To Better Communication

Here are some basic principles and techniques of communication to begin using. They include #1 - active listening, #2 - using "I messages," and #3 - choosing the right time to communicate.

#1. Active Listening

Active listening involves being open, setting aside your own feelings momentarily, and trying to understand what the person is saying. To listen actively you must:

- Put yourself in the other person's place.
- Show understanding and acceptance.
- Restate the person's concerns in your own words.
- Don't interrupt.
- Maintain eye contact.
- Listen carefully.

How well do you actively listen? What could you do to improve?

#2. Using "I messages" -

"I messages" communicate how you feel about a situation and what you expect of the other person. Unlike "You messages," which blame, accuse, and label people, "I messages" get the message across without putting the other person on the defensive. Consider the following example which shows the difference between a "You message" and an "I message:"

(You message) *"You are so inconsiderate, coming home this late and not even calling me!"*

(I message) *"I get very worried when you come home late and don't call me. In the future, please call me and tell me when you're going to be late."*

What differences do you see between the two statements? _____

Which would be easier to hear? _____

Which do you think would have the better results? _____

Exercise: How to construct an "I message:"

"I feel _____
(state the emotion you are feeling, ex: hurt, angry, disappointed, upset, etc.)
when you _____
(state the facts about what the person did or said)
and I want _____
(state what you expect or want from the person)

Exercise: Change the following "You Messages" to "I Messages:"

You are so selfish! You never want to do the things I want to do!

You are such a slob! Your room is a pig sty!

You aren't trustworthy. You never should have told them my secret!



#3. Timing

It is important to use good timing when bringing up a conflict situation or when discussing difficult issues in an attempt to resolve a conflict. In general, it is best to discuss issues or conflicts when:

- You are alone in a private setting with the person with whom you have the conflict.
- You and the other person have ample time to talk.
- You and the other person are rested and generally feeling good.

DO NOT discuss conflict issues when you or the other person involved are angry, tired, upset, and/or under any unusual stress.

Conflicts escalate or grow bigger when

- people take sides.
- people feel threatened.
- people have no interest in working it out.
- there is an increase in acting out anger, fear, frustration, etc.
- people's needs are not met.
- people lack the skills and awareness to resolve conflict.

Conflicts de-escalate when

- people focus on the problem, not the people involved.
- emotions are expressed, not acted out.
- threats are eliminated.
- people cooperate.
- needs are discussed.
- people use peacemaking skills, meaning communication skills.

What changes, if any, do you need to make in the area of timing?



Resolving Conflicts

Now that you have learned some basic communication skills, here are some guidelines to follow in resolving almost any conflict.

1. Set the tone. After you decide that there is a conflict that must be resolved, and you agree on a time and place to discuss the problem, set the tone for the first meeting. This can be done by saying something like:

"I want us to come to an agreement on this," or "I believe we can work together to resolve this problem."

2. Define and discuss the problem. Identify the issue involved (the surface issue as well as underlying issue). Get everyone to agree on what the problem is.

"Can we agree to discuss the following issue...? OR "The problem we need to work on is this: Does everyone agree?"

3. Allow ample time to discuss the problem. Take notes if necessary. Get a clear idea of what the problem is and how both parties view it.

"We have a problem getting this project started. If we don't hurry up, we'll miss the deadline and nothing will get done. It's very frustrating."

4. Summarize your progress. Summarize the discussion and the understanding of the problem. Be sure everyone involved has heard and perceived the same information.

"Jane says that she is the only one interested in taking responsibility for the fund-raiser and she wants help. Randy thinks that the fund-raiser is a bad idea."

5. Explore alternative solutions. These should be discussed thoroughly to determine the advantages and disadvantages of each and possible future consequences.

"Here are some options: We could move ahead with the fund-raiser and assign duties to each person on the committee. Or we could scrap the idea and plan for one next year. Or we could get other people involved to help us to make it a success."

6. Agree on a solution. Choose a solution that is acceptable to both parties. It should be specific, stating exactly what each person will do and how it will be done. The agreement should be balanced so that each person contributes something to the solution.

"Jane agrees to handle the advertising and collection of money. Randy agrees to do the planning, assign duties, and help with collecting."

7. Schedule a follow-up meeting. The follow-up meeting enables those involved to come back together and review how the solution is or is not working and to discuss any unexpected problems that may have arisen. It helps to make both parties accountable for what they agreed to do.

Exercise:

Using the steps listed above, apply them to a real problem situation or conflict in your life. It can be either a current problem or one that occurred in the past. Evaluate the process and write down what possible outcomes might occur as a result of using this method of conflict resolution.

Briefly describe the problem you are dealing with and who is involved:

Step #1 - Set the tone. What would you say to begin working on the problem?

Step #2 - Define and discuss the problem. Describe in detail both your perception of the problem and that of the other person or persons involved. If you are not sure of their perception, write down what you think it is.

Step #3. Allow ample time to discuss the problem.

Step #4 - Summarize your progress. Confirm what you have written about the problem in Step #2. Be sure it is an accurate statement of the problem.

Step #5 - Explore alternative solutions. These solutions should be acceptable to all involved. They should be specific and not open to interpretation. They should include actions on the part of all involved. Come up with as many solutions as you can, with the understanding that some of them may not be used.

Step #6 - Agree on a solution. Decide on which of the above solutions would best resolve this problem.

Step #7 – For this exercise, instead of scheduling a follow-up meeting, evaluate the possible outcomes or results you would expect from using these solutions.

Evaluating Solutions

After generating a number of solutions, each solution should be evaluated and the best one selected. Ask the following questions:

- 1. Does the solution satisfy all involved?*
- 2. Is the solution specific? Does it specify who is to do what, how, and when?*
- 3. Is the solution realistic? Can everyone realistically follow through with what they have agreed to do?*
- 4. Does the solution prevent the problem from recurring in the future?*
- 5. Does the solution specify what is to happen if the problem recurs?*

Write your answers or notes below:

Conflict In Personal Relationships: Focusing on "Wants" instead of "Don't Wants"

Many conflicts in personal, marital or friendship relationships involve conflicts when people focus on the negative aspects of the relationship, what they object to or don't want, instead of what they want.

Don't Wants

I don't want to spend vacation with your parents.
I don't want to see a martial arts film.
I don't want to listen to heavy metal music.
I don't like it when you stay out so late.
I don't want to see you flirting with other men.

I don't want arguing, bickering and fighting.

Wants

I want for us to go to the beach this year.
I want to see a romantic film.
I want to listen to classical music.
I would like you to come home earlier.
I want you to show me affection when we're out.
I want for us to talk calmly, not argue.

Couples Counseling

It is sometimes difficult for couples to resolve conflict by themselves. Personal histories, learned patterns of behavior, values and assumptions all serve to complicate the process. It is advisable to seek the help of trained counselors who can work with the couples to help them achieve a satisfactory solution to the problems they are facing. The success of counseling depends on several factors, including the couple's motivation to work out their differences, the length of time they have been in conflict, and the severity of the problems they are experiencing.



*Always aim at complete harmony of thought and word and deed.
Mohandas Gandhi*



The Role of a Mediator

Some problems are best solved with the aid of a mediator - a person who remains a neutral third party who is trained to facilitate discussion leading to a reasonable and acceptable solution to the conflict. The mediator's role is to help disputing parties clarify what is important to them, understand all sides of a problem, explore all possible options, and come to agreements they can live with.

A major part of mediation is keeping both parties on track and working together harmoniously and effectively to come up with a mutually agreed upon solution. In mediation, each party is given a chance to share their perception of the problem or conflict without being interrupted by the other. Each is given the freedom to speak without interruptions.

After both parties present their perceptions of the problem, they brainstorm possible solutions to the problem. They discuss and evaluate the solutions with the aid of the mediator and come to an agreement on how the problem should be solved. The chosen solution must satisfy both parties. It must be specific and realistic. It must prevent the problem from recurring in the future. Any solution may be acceptable, as long as it is mutually agreed upon.

If you should choose mediation as a means of resolving a conflict, be sure that you work with a trained mediator.



Summary

In this module you have learned how conflict is a normal part of life. Resolving conflict requires the practice of good communication techniques. By working with a counselor, you have the opportunity to practice the techniques presented in this module in a safe, non-threatening setting. The more serious conflicts in your life will take time to resolve, but the important steps you are taking now will enable you to confront and deal with them more effectively in the future.

We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are.

Anais Nin