Four Essential Skills for Managing Differences and Resolving Conflict

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What is Conflict?

There are many ways to define conflict, but one of the simplest definitions can be summed up in just two words: problematic differences. In other words, conflict occurs when individual or group differences become a threat to something important to us, such as our needs, our values, our goals, or our sense of identity.

Natural Reactions to Conflict

Littlejohn and Domenici write that “most of us are not very reflective about how to act in conflict situations. We just do what comes naturally.” Unfortunately, “one’s first reaction is often not the most constructive response.” In particular:

- We tend to be biased, viewing the world from a self-serving perspective.
- We tend to make assumptions that may not be accurate.
- We tend to be defensive and closed-minded.
- We tend to let our emotions and psychological defense mechanisms govern our behavior.

A Better Way: SLOW Down

Littlejohn and Domenici’s observations about our natural reactions to conflict are followed by a recommendation: “The key to effective conflict management is to take a step back, look carefully at the process, and build a more effective framework in which to manage the difference.”

Fortunately, it is possible to build such a framework by focusing on four skills that form the basis of many proven conflict resolution processes such as mediation. These skills, which can be remembered by the acronym SLOW, are:

- Setting a positive and collaborative tone
- Listening and acknowledging feelings, emotions, and experiences
- Observing and organizing from an outside perspective
- Working to find a creative, win-win solution

Essential Skill #1: Setting a positive and collaborative tone

Too often, we view conflict from a competitive stance. That is, we try to fight for our own position, prove that we are right, and win the battle. We might succeed, but at what cost? Have we really won if in the process of arguing our position, we have damaged our relationship with someone who is important to us or someone that we need to work with in the future?
In order to engage conflict more constructively and with better results, we must move toward a more collaborative approach, viewing conflict not as a battle to be fought, but rather as a problem to be solved jointly by the two differing parties. When we define our differences in these terms, they become much easier to approach. We can engage in dialogue instead of debate. We can look for solutions that meet both parties’ needs. And we can acknowledge that even in the midst of differences, there is almost always common ground to be discovered.

From a practical standpoint, setting the tone involves intentionally changing the way we think and talk about conflict. It means being aware of our natural tendencies to engage conflict in ways that are not constructive and, as Lincoln put it, letting “the better angels of our nature” prevail.

**Essential Skill #2: Listening and acknowledging feelings, emotions, and experiences**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor who was executed during World War II for his opposition to the Nazis, wrote that “nothing we despise in the other man is entirely absent from ourselves… We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or don’t do, and more in the light of what they suffer.”

Bonhoeffer realized that people have an inherent need for empathy, a need to be heard and understood. In conflict situations, one of the biggest barriers to cooperation is when one party is unwilling to hear or acknowledge the other’s feelings, experiences, and perspectives.

Sometimes we are unwilling to hear or acknowledge another person because we disagree strongly with the positions they are holding. We feel that if we legitimize their emotions, we are weakening our own position by being sympathetic to theirs.

One of the most helpful perspectives in dealing with conflict is the realization that acknowledgement is not the same as agreement. We can legitimize someone’s emotions and acknowledge the reality of their experiences without legitimizing the substance of their position or even agreeing that their emotions are a reasonable response to the situation at hand. We can do so by listening actively and reflecting back to the other person what we hear them saying. This technique provides both a sense of empathy and an opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings or misperceptions that would hinder future communication.

**Essential Skill #3: Observing and organizing from an outside perspective**

When two people are in conflict with one another, each has their own perspective on the situation—their side of the story, as we might say. To effectively resolve conflict, we must hear both of these perspectives and formulate what William Ury refers to as “the third side.” The third side, or third story, is how an outside observer might describe the conflict.

As one of the parties in a conflict, your own biases will undoubtedly prevent you from fully discovering the third story. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't try. You may need to ask questions in order to better understand the other person’s perspective. When you ask questions, adopt a “not-knowing” stance—that is, a stance of genuine interest and curiosity. Don’t ask rhetorical questions or questions that seek to trap the other person, and be careful to not let your tone of voice suggest that that you already know what the answer to your question will be.
After you've listened to the other side, try to describe the conflict in as neutral terms as possible, emphasizing any common ground that you see. What are the issues at hand? What emotions are involved? What does each party seem to want? Sometimes just telling the third story out loud can disarm defensiveness and move parties toward greater collaboration. A properly constructed third story demonstrates understanding and empathy, and it can serve to clarify the issues that need to be discussed.

Once these issues are identified, the next step is to develop a plan for addressing them—that is, to organize the conversation. Although there are many nuances and caveats to consider here, a general rule of thumb is to start with the issues that seem easiest to resolve. Resolving an easy issue will often build momentum, encourage optimism, reveal common ground, and provide incentives for continued collaboration. This will make the harder issues easier to discuss and increase the likelihood of resolving them.

**Essential Skill #4: Working to find a creative, win-win solution**

Once you have decided what the issues are and have developed a tentative plan for discussing them, it's time to start talking. This is the stage of the process in which creativity and open-mindedness are particularly important. Your goal here is to propose and consider options that seem to address both yours and the other party's interests.

It's important to distinguish between interests and demands or positions. When parties negotiate, they often begin by stating their position—what they desire the outcome to be. But sometimes what someone says they want is not the same as what they really want. Daniel Dana puts it this way:

“Conflict tends to divert our attention from our real interests by creating another interest—surviving or winning. That more basic, instinctive interest may eclipse your other interests and make it harder to resolve a conflict. So just step back out of the conflict and away from anybody else involved in the conflict and think about what you would want if you could have your wish. That’s your interest. Simplify the situation. What do you really want?”

Interests tend to be arranged in a hierarchy, with stated positions at the top and basic human needs at the bottom. For instance, plaintiffs in lawsuits often seek monetary awards, but what they really want may be much deeper. Injured plaintiffs may indeed want money, but may settle for a significantly lesser amount if it is accompanied by an apology or a change in policy that would prevent similar injuries in the future. A terminated employee may seek reinstatement but really have no desire to return to her former place of work. Instead, the employee may be satisfied with solutions that address her deeper needs for respect, security, and the ability to provide for her family. A positive reference for a future position or even assistance in securing such a position may address some of these interests and lead to a solution that is better for both the employee and her former employer.

There is no magic formula for arriving at win-win solutions that address both parties' interests, but one helpful suggestion is to separate the generation and evaluation of options. Engage in some brainstorming and joint problem solving with the other person. Initially, leave every option on the table, even those that you’re sure won’t work. Then, after you have identified a variety of options for resolving the conflict, jointly evaluate these options according to how well they meet your interests and the interests of the other person. It's likely that you'll have to rule out some options...
right away, as they will clearly be unacceptable to either you or the other person. But as you explore the options, you may be able to identify why some are more acceptable than others. This process may lead you to discover even more possible solutions, and with perseverance you may find a way of resolving the conflict that is acceptable to both you and the other person.

As you are exploring options, be prepared to be on the receiving end of high emotions and even hostility. Instead of responding defensively, keep moving forward, focusing on the issues at hand and not the behavior of the other person. Remember that the goal is to find a mutually acceptable solution that meets as many interests as possible. It is rare for even good solutions to meet all of both parties’ interests, so be flexible. Prioritize your interests, and be willing to compromise on those that are less important to you. Likewise, acknowledge any flexibility, or conciliatory gestures, that the other person shows. Finally, don't forget the other three skills described above. It’s still important to continue setting a positive, collaborative tone. It’s still important to listen attentively and acknowledge the other person’s emotions and experiences. And it’s still important to keep the third story in mind, if for no other reason than to remember that your perspective is not the only one.

Concluding Thoughts

Nothing I’ve written here is guaranteed to solve every conflict you will face. But keeping these perspectives in mind can help you approach conflict in new and more constructive ways. As a firm believer in experiential learning, the best advice I can give you is to try these tips out and see what you learn. Keep what works for you and throw out what doesn’t. And feel free to let me know what you discover along the way.

References

