

Practice Listening Skills

Turn to page 2 to learn ways to develop your listening skills and ways to apply them at work or home.

Ways to Make Conflicts Beneficial

Consider these tips to turn conflict into a constructive tool.

Welcome!

This quarter's theme is *Managing Conflicts*. We welcome your feedback at ask@lifesolutionsforyou.com.

DidUknow?

Knowledge Tips and Skills

There are knowledge, tips, and skills you can learn that will enable you to manage conflict more effectively, perhaps even stop it before it begins.

- ◆ Be observant of physical conditions of the meeting site, e.g., confined, hot areas can intensify conflicts and outdoor meetings can reduce tensions.
- ◆ Round tables give everyone equal seating status.
- ◆ Rectangular tables have two dominant seats — the head and foot of the table. Try not to allow antagonists to sit in these seats. Sit in one of these seats, yourself, if you are facilitating a meeting or if you want an advantage.
- ◆ If possible, sit potential male and female antagonists side by side, not across from one another.
- ◆ Call a short break if a situation gets heated.

Caveat: These skills, observations, and steps are not necessarily the same for all cultural groups. Consequently, if you are working with multi-cultural groups, you may need to read specific information on the cultures represented and modify your approach.

Source:
http://www.ssi.nrcs.usda.gov/publications/borders/1_PPCs/PPC012_DFConflictManagement.pdf

Keeping Conflicts Constructive

If you've ever worked with a team of people, you know that conflict is inevitable. But you may not know that conflict can be constructive.

All too often, disagreements among group members aren't resolved in a healthy manner. People may leave a meeting feeling hurt, misunderstood, or alienated. Conflicts may linger, creating tension and disrupting work. While we can't stop disagreements from happening, we can use conflicts as assets — to strengthen relationships, make sounder group decisions, and motivate members.

Using conflict constructively requires that all group members practice basic ground rules of conflict management. Without mutual practice of these principles, conflict can become destructive and hostile. Or just as damaging, controversial issues may be sidestepped just to keep the peace. It may take some time and effort to correct the problem.

Express disagreement.

Group members must first decide they're going to be honest with one another. This means that when they have differing views, they'll express those disagreements instead of remaining silent. (This isn't an invitation, however, to say whatever you want.)

But by not speaking up when you disagree, you deprive the group of potentially valuable insight that might redirect how problems are solved or important decisions are made. You could even say that by not speaking up, you're deceiving the group because your silence may be seen as agreement.

Be sensitive.

As you express disagreements, be aware that the words you choose can affect listeners positively or negatively.

For example, if a woman made this statement, "Men don't listen well in conversation," it may have been an honest expression of her opinion, but it certainly wasn't sensitive to the men in the group.

Instead she could have made a general statement such as, "I find it difficult when someone I'm talking to doesn't listen well." This captures the essence of what she wants to say, but doesn't push emotional buttons for those in the group. Considering your words carefully is more than just being politically correct. It's extending consideration to those around you. Your disagreements have a greater chance of being heard when you phrase them sensitively.

Criticize the idea, not the person.

Express your disagreements in a way that doesn't devalue the person with whom you disagree. Don't allow personal attacks or name calling to enter your relationships. That will only escalate conflicts and cause people to choose sides.

Don't be defensive.

When you're on the receiving end of disagreements, you can feel defensive even if the people aren't attacking you.

Sometimes, the people who are disagreeing are simply not grasping your point. So rather than leaping to defend your positions, listen carefully to other people's remarks. Ask them to summarize your main points. This gives you chances to pinpoint possible misunderstandings and clarify your position.

You can make conflicts work for your team, but it takes a commitment from all group members. Each person must agree to honestly state disagreements in a sensitive manner that focuses on the ideas, not the people. Approached in this way, conflicts can be one of your greatest assets.

Source: Gilles, G. (Reviewed 2011). *Keeping conflicts constructive*. Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.

Practice Listening Skills

Listening is an art, a skill, and a discipline. Like other skills, it requires self-control. You must understand what is involved in listening and develop the necessary techniques to be silent and listen. You must ignore your own needs and focus attention on the person speaking. Hearing becomes listening only when you pay attention to what is said and follow it very closely.

Ways You Demonstrate that You Are Listening:

- ◆ Your body language
- ◆ Making eye contact
- ◆ Keeping your body open
- ◆ Echoing words
- ◆ Nods of your head
- ◆ Leaning toward the speaker

You Listen in Order to:

- ◆ Show your support and help the other person(s) relax
- ◆ Show you are accepting them and are open to them
- ◆ Enable each one to speak and be heard
- ◆ Be able to ask questions to clarify
- ◆ Check assumptions
- ◆ Clear up misperceptions
- ◆ Restate or paraphrase
- ◆ Find the key points or issues
- ◆ Provide the silence necessary to encourage speech
- ◆ Know when to bring to closure and when to test for agreement

You need to show that you are listening carefully. This is called *attending*. Attending skills build rapport and help people feel at ease.

- ◆ Listen without interrupting.
- ◆ Pay attention.
- ◆ Use supportive body language.
- ◆ Paraphrase facts and feelings.

You also need to practice reacting and responding in positive ways. Using good responding skills help people understand the things you care about. It also helps you collect information about the situation.

- ◆ Ask clarifying questions.
- ◆ Ask probing questions.
- ◆ Restate what the other person is saying, catching the essence but trying to take out the volatile phrases or language. This is called *laundering* language and it can reduce friction.
- ◆ Summarize facts and feelings.
- ◆ Reframe issues. Focus on the interests, not positions.
- ◆ Try to always use "I" language instead of "you" language. For example, don't say, "When you do that, you make me feel ..." Instead you can say, "When you do that I feel ..."
- ◆ Try to communicate directly with the other person.
- ◆ Be forward thinking. Try to focus on the future.

Use *brainstorming* to find as many options or solutions as possible. The ground rules to brainstorming are that the people in the meeting are just throwing out ideas. At this point in the process, do not eliminate any ideas. The other ground rule is that mere mention of an idea does not mean that either person is agreeing to that idea. It's just an idea thrown out for purposes of the brainstorming session. Brainstorming helps turn good ideas into a plan of action. Look for points of agreement that the participants have in common and mention them.

You listen by paying attention.

Paying attention and listening without interruption allow the other person to "let off steam." Before any serious resolutions can occur, you need to let the other person know that you understand where they are coming from and you understand that they feel strongly about the issues you are discussing with them. Their intense emotions must be acknowledged and affirmed before serious solutions can be discussed. You should encourage the other person to let off steam and explain concerns by using verbal cues such as:

- ◆ "I see."
- ◆ "I understand."
- ◆ "That's a good point."
- ◆ "I can see that you feel strongly about that."
- ◆ "I can understand how you could see it like that."

These nonverbal actions also show the other person that you hear what they are saying:

- ◆ Squarely face the other person.
- ◆ Adopt an open posture.
- ◆ Lean discreetly, not threateningly, toward the other person.
- ◆ Maintain eye contact. Take cues from the other person as to the extent of eye contact with which he or she is comfortable.
- ◆ Try to relax as you interact with the other person.

Of course, for the other person to know that you are listening, you must make a response. The effectiveness of your listening will be determined by the style and quality of your response.

Source: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs - Alternative Dispute Resolution. (Updated June 17, 1998.) *Practicing listening skills*. Retrieved October 23, 2007, from <http://www.va.gov>.

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