Resolving Interpersonal Conflict: Building Better Relationships

We all live in a dynamic and complex network of family members, friends, co-workers, or classmates. In most situations, we find ways to get along with each other. But every once in a while, a roommate occupies the bathroom for too long, or a driver cuts you off. When conflicting goals or actions, contrary beliefs and opinions, competition for limited resources, or miscommunications and misunderstandings occur, interpersonal conflict may be unavoidable.

Just as there are many sources of conflict, the way people choose to deal with them also varies. Some try to avoid conflict as much as possible. They may think that conflict is a sign there is something wrong with a relationship, that "nice" people do not experience conflict, or that conflict inevitably brings frustration, anger, or anxiety. This approach may prove to be ineffective for two reasons. First, conflict is inevitable. In any kind of interaction there is a probability that people will disagree or want different things, and there is nothing wrong with that. Second, it is not conflict and "negative" emotions that pose a real threat in an interaction, but the *way* in which it is handled. When conflicts are solved in a positive, constructive manner, they have the potential to bring the comfort of reconciliation and the satisfaction of one's needs, the renewal of closeness, and the strengthening of faith that the people involved in a situation are able to cooperate and overcome obstacles.

So, what does it mean to solve conflicts constructively? Here are a few tips that will help you deal with conflicts more efficiently:

Set the right tone for the conversation. The tone in which you start the conversation may influence the entire conflict resolution process. It is important that both parties have the will to solve the conflict rather than fight some more. It may be a good idea to chat for a short time about things not related to the conflict and to express your appreciation for your counterpart's willingness to cooperate. You may say things such as "Thank you for committing your time to this issue," "I really appreciate that we can talk about this problem," or "I would like to hear what you think about this situation."

Also, it helps to agree on some rules for discussion, such as: do not interrupt until the other person is finished and use I statements. I statements are less accusatory and threatening to your counterpart. Try to say, "I feel like you don't respect my time," or "I don't agree with you" rather than "You don't respect my time," or "You are wrong."

Listen. One of the obstacles to solving a conflict efficiently is a human tendency to "listen ahead". This means that during a conversation our own thoughts about what a speaker says cause us to jump to conclusions about what the person is trying to say. Once we think we "know" it, we do not further listen to what is really being said. We can also start thinking about what we're going to say in response, and thereby stop listening.

Fortunately, listening is a skill, and it can be practiced. One exercise to try is talking with a friend about a topic you disagree on. Let your friend talk for about two minutes and do not disturb him or her with your comments other ones encouraging him or her to talk, such as, "Really? Tell me more about it." After two minutes, tell your friend how you understood his or her opinion and check whether it was accurate. This exercise can be also applied in the real-life conflict. When discussing a controversial topic, take time to repeat what the other person said. It will help you to understand your counterpart's point of view as well as avoid miscommunication. Knowing that you will get your two minutes to be heard will also help you to listen better.

Avoid negative attributions: Imagine that you are driving a car. The light turns green and you have not yet accelerated when a driver behind you honks their horn. What would your reaction be? Would you be upset with the other driver rushing you in such a rude way? If yes, you would be making a negative attribution, or in other words, you would find a negative explanation for the other driver's behavior.

Making negative attributions is a common source of conflicts and a serious obstacle in solving them. However, it is also easy to avoid them by temporarily withholding your judgments and checking what someone's motives actually were. The situation described above actually happened to my friend, and she got very angry at the other car's driver. Imagine her surprise when later on she found out that the other driver was in fact her friend who, by honking, wanted to get her attention to say "Hi." So, before you get angry, make sure that you have a sound reason for it.

Ask, "Why?" and, "Why not?" When dealing with conflict, it is crucial to differentiate between interests and positions. In *The College Administrator's Survival Guide*, Gunsaulus defines positions as *what* a person wants in the conflict and interests as *why* he or she wants it. For instance, if you are discussing with your friend that you want him or her not to be late for meetings with you, this is a position. Your interest may be that you consider this kind of behavior disrespectful, or it causes you stress about whether you will make it to the concert on time.

It is not difficult to identify interests, whether yours or your counterpart's. You can do this by incorporating questions such as, "Why?" and, "Why not?" into your discussion. There are many positive outcomes of this approach. First, it deepens understanding. Second, conflicts may have underlying meanings. For example, an argument about pieces of clothing in a living room may cover one side's resentment about carrying out more household chores than the other side does. Asking "why" questions helps to reveal and focus on the real subject of the conflict. Finally, since there is usually more than one interest behind a position, knowing them gives you more possibilities to actually solve the problem. For instance, when solving the problem of your friend being late, you can either agree that he or she will work on punctuality or that you will meet at the concert hall rather than at your place next time.

Keep the future in mind. Fisher and Ury, in *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in*, state that, "If you ask two people why they are arguing, the answer will typically identify a cause, not a purpose." When you argue about the cause, the focus is on the past and what started the conflict. As important as it is to realize why you are fighting, it is crucial to remember that the purpose of constructive arguing is to understand each other and come up with solutions for the future rather than ruminate over past negative feelings and harms.

Treat others respectfully. Although it may be difficult to see that your counterpart's interests are important in the midst of an argument, try to remember that he or she wants to be understood and respected in the conversation as much as you do. What is more, according to Fisher and Ury, when people feel heard, they tend to reciprocate. People perceive those who understand them as smart and caring, and therefore, as also worth listening to. So, when you treat others respectfully you tend to be treated in the same way.

Choose a neutral ground for discussion. In some situations it is best to choose a place for discussion where both people feel comfortable and that is not the "territory" of one person. For example, meeting in one person's dorm room may make the other person feel insecure or uncomfortable, since he or she is a guest in the room. Meeting on non-neutral

ground also poses the threat of responses such as, "I want you to leave now," or, "If you do not do what I expect, I will just leave." It may be a good idea to go for a walk or to sit in a café to discuss difficulties.

Solve conflicts when they are small. Many people think that conflicts left untouched will dissolve on their own. This is rarely the case. In most cases, an unaddressed conflict grows, and resentment and negative feelings increase over time. Moreover, when the emotions are intense, and the causes of the conflict are unclear because of the time that has passed from the first incident, it is much more difficult to manage.

Conflicts are inevitable and solving them often takes time and effort. A positive attitude, listening skills, and focusing on interests and solutions, will help you get through the rough spots more smoothly, and increase your mutual understanding and satisfaction in the relationship. Also remember that the Roosevelt University Counseling Center offers help and support. Come and speak with a counselor if you experience conflicts that are numerous and overwhelming. Talking to someone and getting a new perspective how to approach a situation can help you and your relationships evolve.