Dealing with Conflict

Introduction

Conflict is a normal part of relationships at home and at work. It often arises from differences in perception, interpretation, or opinion. Conflict itself is not necessarily a bad thing but, to get a positive outcome, the way you deal with it is very important.

Reactions to conflict

Flight

Walking away, or refusing to acknowledge the situation. There are situations where this may be appropriate (when safety is at risk), but this approach doesn't usually resolve the situation. It just delays having to deal with it, and sometimes makes it worse.

Diversion

Changing the subject or deflecting attention. This may be appropriate if you need time to think about the situation, or if it's an inappropriate time to deal with it. Again, it's not that effective as a solution.

Fight

Being defensive or aggressive. This can happen when people have other issues going on, when they don't know how else to deal with it and, commonly, when it surprises them. It rarely results in a positive outcome for either party, escalating or spiralling out of control, or festering under the surface. It often results in permanent damage to relationships.

Constructive resolution

Happens when those dealing with problems use constructive communication so that both parties feel fairly treated and can live with the outcome.

Conflict resolution

1. Be aware of warning signs and address the matter before serious conflict emerges. Signs could be a change in behaviour, decreased communication, body language, tone of voice and odd remarks. It's usually best to ask if everything is all right. That might be all that's needed to prompt a rational discussion before things come to a head. Regardless of the response, it's essential that you are prepared to listen.

2. Listen to understand, as opposed to listening so you can come back with an answer. It's easy to feel like you immediately need to justify, defend, or come up with solutions, particularly if a person is behaving aggressively. The most important thing to do is actively listen and hear all their concerns Dend issues. Well-timed questions can also be helpful: "I would like to understand your point of view.", "Can you tell me more?", "What's on your mind?" This can help you get the information you need to help resolve the issue.

The most important thing is to listen to the answers and avoid premature judgement. Look at the person, say, "Yes, I understand", and nod your head to show you are still engaged and listening. Take notes if necessary. Try to avoid interrupting as this can be very frustrating for the party and reduce your chances of getting the full picture. If necessary, seek clarification on points when they have finished.

3. Get to the actual source of the conflict by allowing the person to let off steam. Often the real reason for the conflict emerges the more they talk. Initially it might seem they are irate about a late order. As they say more, you may realise your customer has found a competitor to you who would have given them a larger discount and that is the real issue. Unless you manage to uncover and deal with the real reason for the conflict, you may find it reappears at a later date.

4. Feelings of frustration and anger often influence language choice and behaviour. It's easy to get swept into the situation and respond badly: "How dare they talk to me like that?", or simply shut down because you perceive them to be irrational. The most effective thing to do is remain calm, be kind, and have some empathy for the person. Most people don't enjoy being upset or angry. People's lives can be full of challenges and difficulties that are not apparent to others. Step back and make a decision not to judge until you have all the facts. Separate yourself from the moment and you will stand a much better chance of successful resolution. Think about your verbal language (tone, pitch, volume, use of words), and particularly your body language. It's a great skill to be able to suspend judgment and not take a response personally. It puts you in a strong position to show leadership and manage these type of situations.

5. It's always best not to assume, but to clarify you have heard by using phrases like, "Can I please clarify that the main issue is the cost as well as the late delivery. Am I right?" This allows you to check without making matters worse. By using "I" instead of "you" ("you're obviously upset about the cost"), you can progress the communication without fuelling it. As a rule, people don't like being told what they are, or are not, thinking or doing, especially if it's wrong. It can easily come across as confrontational.

6. Decide whether it's the right time to deal with the conflict. Sometimes you won't have all the facts or the person is so irate that you can't work through solutions with them. Sometimes you might need time to think. In these situations it's good to allow time for someone to compose themself, or for you to think about a situation, or investigate. It's important to be tactful in your explanation for needing the time and essential you follow-up as you have said you would. "I really want to get to the bottom of this for you. I need to check my records and talk to a colleague. I will do that now and call you back by 5pm tonight". In this scenario, you must call back by 5pm, even if to explain that you need longer to resolve things.

7. Put yourself in the other person's shoes. Empathy is really important in any relationship and where there is conflict and a desire to resolve it constructively, it is essential. Before you choose a solution to a problem that has caused conflict, it's always a good idea to put yourself in the other person's shoes and try and get a feel for how your offering will be received. How would you feel and what would be important to you, what would you be most concerned about based on the things they have told you? Reflection and consideration of this person's situation could save you time, ongoing conflict, and possibly a customer relationship.

8. It's important to know when you need help, as some conflict may be too complex or difficult for you to handle alone. A customer may have called and demanded something you don't have the authority to give, or a colleague may raise an issue which you don't know how to deal with from a legal perspective. It's a great thing to be able to recognise when you need help and to find the appropriate person. This is not the same as abdicating responsibility as soon as conflict arises.

9. It's important to get agreement on how to resolve the problem. By the time you get to this stage in the process, the key is to be forward looking, not continually going over problems of the past. Depending on the nature of the conflict it might be feasible to brainstorm possible solutions with the other party, or with somebody else in your business. It's important to consider the commercial impact. It may simply not be feasible to offer the solution the person is seeking, but there could be another way to achieve something similar. It's also important to ensure you don't compromise yourself or the company with a situation that is unsustainable. It's about finding the closest to a win-win solution and not caving in to undue pressure or unrealistic requests.

10. Learn from your experiences with conflict. When you have resolved a conflict, it's always good to review how it arose, how you dealt with it, what worked, and what didn't work. You may uncover that a small amount of extra feedback, or a quick phone call upfront might have eliminated the need to spend time resolving the situation. You may also learn things about your team, customers, or suppliers, which you can use in the future to prevent conflict arising.