

Conflict Resolution—Part 2

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Last week, I described extensively five approaches to resolving conflict:

- **avoiding** (lose/lose) -- ignoring or minimizing the conflict
- **accommodating** (lose/win) -- ignoring or minimizing my own needs
- **competing** (win/lose) -- ignoring or minimizing the needs of the other party
- **compromising** (a low form of win/win) -- both parties' needs are partially satisfied
- **collaborating** (win/win) -- both parties' needs are completely satisfied

The key to executing collaborative conflict resolution rests with this question: "Will you agree to communicate together for as long as it takes us to come up with a solution we both agree meets our needs?" If the parties can agree to this process boundary, they've overcome the emotion of the moment to allow more rational alternatives to be considered.

Three specific steps, taken in the appropriate sequence, will lead to collaborative resolution.

Acknowledge the situation. It does not help to deny or ignore that the conflict exists. All parties involved describe how they see the situation. (One party agrees to listen first. Because of the huge benefits of this process, I encourage my clients to volunteer to be the first listener, as it creates a healthy environment for building the collaboration.) The objective in this step is that all parties feel understood in how they view the situation.

Sometimes the conflict will be resolved at this step—the parties realize that they just see the situation differently, and that the conflict is merely a misunderstanding.

Note that if you can't accomplish this step successfully, the likely outcome of the conflict resolution will be "avoiding" or "accommodating," neither of which are beneficial for the relationships involved.

Describe the desired outcomes (both immediate and long-term). After giving it genuine thought privately, all parties describe what outcomes they desire—what would be a "win" for them in resolving the conflict. Again, there is a lot of listening and acknowledging required in this step.

CAUTION: There is a tendency to start debating HOW the outcomes could be accomplished. That comes in the third step and should not be started until this second step is complete. At this stage, focus on what you want the outcomes TO BE, not on how they will be achieved.

Creatively generate options. By now, the toughest hurdles have been passed, and you are nearing the payoff! Alternatives that can satisfy the desired outcomes of all parties are always possible; the option generation effort merely has to embrace "and" thinking instead of "or" thinking. The question becomes "How can we accomplish this outcome and this outcome?" You may encounter some frustration as you generate options, but you will eventually come up with an idea where everyone just feels intuitively that this solution will work—all parties agree that the suggested approach will meet their needs.

Be sure to build the plan completely, communicating expectations with everyone who needs to contribute to follow-up activity. The temptation here is that once relief is experienced, everyone goes off celebrating the victory, but the execution of the work needed to accomplish the desired outcomes is dropped, and the potential success is never achieved.

Is all this easy? No way—it requires a lot of effort! "Avoidance" and "accommodating" are easy. "Competing" isn't as easy, but it's easier than all this work! Only "collaborating" helps individuals build strong relationships for the long-term. With practice, the process gets easier!

If the conflict is deep, and preliminary efforts seem destined to failure, consider a competent third-party facilitator. Select a person who can focus on managing the process without becoming invested in the content of the dispute. Such a person can help all parties listen better and understand the others' points of view.

If you would like a copy of last week's article, or if you'd like some help in learning how to accomplish productive conflict resolution, contact me at the e-mail address above or at my office at (478)-988-0237.

Here is an illustrative story, added April 30, 2008 (provided by my daughter, Alison). Two women wanted an orange. If they compromised, each would receive half. They spent enough time to understand each other's needs, collaborating to find a solution they both could support. One took the rind for cooking, and the other took the inside for making juice. They both received double what they would have received if they had settled for a compromise!