



CULTIVATING A CLIMATE FOR HEALTHY CONFLICT RESOLUTION

A *Tools for Change* handout



Coping in a highly competitive society, we all have developed ways which make it difficult to develop trust and cooperation. We often trigger each other and act in ways that are not skillful. When we cultivate patience and hold a generosity of spirit toward one another, we can listen more openly and express our truths fully. When we remember that we all have limitations and hold compassion for one another, we can work through the difficulties that arise between us.

Conflicts are a natural and inevitable part of life, not a reflection of something gone “wrong.” They arise out of differences in experience and values. It is when conflict is forced underground that it becomes destructive. Working through conflict openly inspires learning, trust, and strengthens the fiber of relationships- we come to value differences.

When tension arises, always strive to make your common aspirations explicit and keep them in the in the forefront. Support one another’s humanity while being honest about your concerns. Listen well, so that you can come to a full appreciation for why people have the perspectives that they do. Understanding does not equal agreement but it is a starting place from which to find resolution.

When you experience conflict, try to move from either/or binary thinking into an inclusive view that is both/and. There is more than one legitimate way of viewing anything. Striving for uniformity stifles creativity – fueling rigidity and defensiveness. Embracing diversity in view and experience creates resilience, invites creativity and expands our capacity for effective problem-solving. Hold the possibility that a “win win” can be found.

Conflicts are relational. Personalities are seldom the source of the problems. Focusing on the relational aspect of conflict avoids blame and guilt and creates the needed atmosphere to openly explore what is at stake. Investigating the impact of what has been happening (or might happen) on your shared aspirations fosters cooperation and clarity about what changes are needed.

Endeavor to see everyone as trying to do their best and that each has good reasons for behaving the way they do. (Tensions increase when people discount the validity of each other’s perspectives.) People often believe that others operate from the same assumptions about what they consider to be appropriate behavior, i.e. what is striven for and what is to be avoided. These assumptions are often culturally, class and gender based. Try to note the assumptions you are operating out of and express them when you share your perspectives.

Character judgments and blame lead to scapegoating, which is painful for the chosen victim, and it prevents addressing the actual conditions that need to be changed. First investigate the different perspectives, so that you can understand peoples’ different positions. Always respect the integrity of the individual who you believe may have made a mistake, while challenging what you think of as the problematic behavior. Keep the focus on what you believe is needed to attain common goals. People readily take responsibility and strive to overcome their limitations when they are not being blamed but instead are being supported in changing. What are the conditions that would foster transformation in individuals and the group? What specifically needs to be done to bring about these conditions?

Suggestions of things to remember:

We all make mistakes, which is how we learn what (not who) needs to be changed to succeed.
Change is possible, in fact it is inevitable.
Inquire into what is needed to build trust and try to act on or ask for what you understand is needed
Hold the possibility that there is a resolution that works for everyone
Have generosity of spirit, curiosity and compassion for yourself and all concerned.
Listen openly (without anticipating your response to other's words)
Respect does not mean agreement.
Be honest and open, take time to breathe (or have "time outs") so you can be both listen well and express what is true for you.
Social conditioning and power dynamics are always operative. By our acknowledging them, they can no longer control the situation.
Determine direction by the consequence of activity on shared mission, values and goals

Helpful practices:

Responsibility

Take responsibility for the ways that you have contributed to the situation (both what you did or what you didn't do) and what you can concretely do to support transformation in your self and others.

Active Listening

After hearing a concern, repeat back what was understood before responding. This helps people feel heard and provides an opportunity to clear up misunderstandings.

Empathy

It is good to express why it makes sense to you that the individual has the perspective that s/he does given her position (past and present). This does not mean that you agree but that you respect the different view. This defuses people's need to defend their position and opens up the context to genuine communication and openness to find a mutually satisfactory resolution to the issues at stake.

Agreements

Figure out together what specific behavioral changes and/or actions are needed and what context will support them. Make concrete agreements about what each person involved will do differently in the future. All agreements should be written down for clarity and future reference.

Acknowledgment

It is good for all parties to express what they appreciate about each other and what they have learned in the process of working through the conflict(s).

Follow-Up

Create a way to check in with one another at a specified time and find out from one another if agreements are being kept, if anything needs to be re-negotiated and/or something in particular is needed to support the implementation of change.