

CONFFLICT SOLUTIONS

Fixing Interpersonal Conflict at Work

Expert Advice to Resolve Workplace Discord

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IN ACCORD
Fixing Interpersonal Conflict at Work

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Three Questions to Resolve Conflict

Continually asking questions, rather than making declarations, is a core creed in my resolution work. I do this because those who are embroiled in the conflict are the ideal people to forge solutions to their own troubles. When you serve in a third party conflict resolution role (e.g. manager, HR representative), the advice you give is far less helpful than asking potent questions that enable the parties to find understanding and agreement. Here are three of my favorite conflict resolution questions:

1. **“What do you want?”** Employees entangled in interpersonal conflict are adept at both declaring what they don’t want and blaming the other person. This “wants” query can help them pivot from retrospective negativity toward a more constructive restatement about their preferred future. A query about their wants also encourages people to articulate requests or craft proposals about what they are requesting from the other person. For example, to circumvent Ryan’s ongoing complaint simply ask, “Ryan, how would you like Sabrina to get your attention when she comes to your office door?”

2. **“Why is that important to you?”** Sabrina may bitterly complain and blame Ryan for what he has done and said. However, Ryan’s actions make sense to him, which is why he has been doing them. These situations benefit from some translation to help both parties understand the deeper meanings and impacts of their behaviors. When Sabrina shares that she’s a lifelong introvert and Ryan’s gregariousness feels invasive to her, Ryan will be more inclined to accept her concerns as a statement about herself and her needs than as a wholesale rebuke of his personality.

3. **“Are you saying...?”** A core concern for the person helping to resolve a conflict is to ensure crystalline clarity about what people are saying. This is necessary both so that the speaker successfully transmits the intended message and so that the receiver hears what the speaker means to convey. These are molasses-like moments in my mediation work during which I intentionally slow the conversation

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to a glacial pace to ensure precise communication. There are many variations of the “Are you saying?” formula. One is simply to recite what the mediator heard and ask how accurate it was. Another is to request that the listener (i.e. the other party) tell the speaker what he or she heard and then test whether the recital met the speaker’s intentions. Use this last technique with caution and only after rapport and progress are underway. Otherwise, the person summarizing may use it as another opportunity to insert more tension into the conversation.

Conclusion

Experiment with these questions and their permutations as you wade into conflict across your work world. I hope you’ll find, as I have, that they serve as keys to unlocking seemingly intractable conflict.

“Our management team is better prepared to handle all facets of conflict after spending a few short days with Chris. His training on conflict management is very comprehensive and engaging. Our managers had fun while learning valuable skills that they were able to apply immediately. His training style is dynamic and allows for lots of audience participation, interaction and practice.”

*Sallie M. Stuvek, Director
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