

Conflict Resolution Reading 25

[Conflict Resolution Skills Module](#)

Interpersonal Conflict Resolution Skills

For most of us, relationships are among the things we value most. We spend a lot of time in relationships. Misunderstandings, impasses, and conflicts are inevitable. Learning to successfully work through interpersonal conflicts may be the single most important skill for personal, family, and career success. It may also be the most difficult skill to learn and do well. We are not born knowing how to communicate and resolve interpersonal conflicts effectively. Fortunately, the skills of self-awareness, self-disclosure, trustworthiness, the ability to listen effectively, ask genuine inquiry questions, send clear messages using “I Statements”, and collaborate, negotiate, and problem-solve with others are all skills that can be learned and mastered. See the [Conflict Resolution Skills Packet: The Skills Required to Successfully Resolve Interpersonal Conflicts](#) ([Conflict Resolution Skills Module](#) for a detailed description of the essential skills needed to resolve interpersonal conflicts successfully. See the [Conflict Resolution Skill Card](#) [Conflict Resolution Skills Module](#) for a two-page summary of these skills.

Below is background information on why we avoid conflict, why attempts at interpersonal conflict resolution often fail, and how we can prevent that from happening.

Background Information on Interpersonal Conflict Resolution

Types of Conflict

1. Intrapersonal conflict occurs when one’s goals, values, or roles diverge.
2. Interpersonal Conflict exists between two or more people, such as family members and friends. It can be the result of a misunderstanding or an impasse in the relationship, or it can be due to a difference in goals, values, and needs.
3. Intragroup conflict occurs within a group or among its members where members disagree over goals or procedures.
4. Intergroup conflict occurs between groups such as political parties, states, and nations or between groups within the same organization or country.

Sources of Conflict

Conflict usually falls into one of several categories:

1. Misunderstandings.
2. Needs, desires, goals, and positions.
3. Power and control.
4. Resources. Conflicts over needs occur when one person's or group/team/nation want something that seems to be in short supply. Examples include water, food, oil, or even a parking space.
5. Values. Conflicts over values occur when parties differ over their most deeply held beliefs, morals, and goals. Value conflicts may also occur within an individual. Values conflicts can be very difficult to resolve and sometimes can only be managed.

Resolution of Conflicts May Result In:

- You lose, the other person wins,
- You win, the other person loses,
- You both lose,
- You both win

Successful Resolution Conflict (Win/Win) Result in:

- You and the other person are satisfied with the outcome
- The relationship is stronger, and both of you are better able to interact with each other
- You both like and trust each other more
- You are both better able to resolve future conflicts with other people

Why We Avoid and Don't Initiate Conversations About Conflicts

1. Lack of trust
2. Unwillingness to self-disclose
3. Fear of rejection
4. Fear of making the situation worse
5. In the past, the other person has communicated that they are not receptive to listening to you and/or to resolving a conflict with you.
6. There is a power difference and the other person has communicated in the past that they are not receptive to resolving conflicts.
7. We fear finding out things about ourselves, such as our contributions to the conflict or other things about ourselves, that we don't want to know or acknowledge.
8. Fear of finding things out about the relationship we don't want to know or acknowledge.
9. Our style of conflict resolution is to deny it, accommodate the other person, or withdraw.
10. The belief that our feelings and needs aren't really important or that the other person's feelings and needs are more important than ours.
11. Having been unsuccessful in the past in trying to resolve conflicts.
12. Lacking the skills to resolve conflicts successfully.

The Problem With Keeping Things In and Not Addressing the Conflict

1. Nothing Changes
2. We use excessive energy to keep our feelings down.
3. We cannot keep things in and they come out in other ways about other issues (usually smaller issues) or we go off on them.
4. We assume others know how we feel but they don't because we have not told them. They are not mind readers.
5. Most people don't like conflict, but if there is a conflict no amount of denying it will make it go away.

6. We resent the other person. If something bothers me about you (I feel disappointed, hurt, frustrated, or whatever with something you have done or not done then there is a conflict in the relationship. If I don't initiate a conversation with you, I keep information about the relationship to myself that you don't know. I am being dishonest because I am not sharing my feelings with you, and I am not giving you an opportunity to change. How can you change if I have not told you how I feel and what is going on? Over time, I may start to resent you, which is unfair because you don't know what is going on, because I am not telling you, and because I am not giving you a chance to change. Resentment is eating away at the relationship, and I may start pulling away and/or being short with you over minor issues.

Why Attempts At Interpersonal Conflict Resolution Go Poorly

The major reasons why attempts at interpersonal conflict resolution go poorly are that the other person or we get thrown off balance, feel defensive, or feel attacked. When we feel attacked, the usual response is to defend ourselves and possibly attack back, rather than look for ways to resolve the conflict successfully. Using an example of a friend who is constantly late, let's look at what we do that makes our attempts to resolve conflict go poorly:

We Blame:

1. When we blame, we may assume it's all their fault. Thus, the goal is to get them to admit blame and take responsibility for making amends. We blame the other person and try to get them to apologize.
2. Blame is about judging and looking backward, not about resolving the conflict and improving the relationship.

The Solution to Blaming:

1. Realize that blaming yourself or others can prevent you from solving the problem and maintaining a good relationship. Everyone makes mistakes occasionally.
2. Look at how you and the other person have contributed to the situation. Own how you have contributed to the situation.
3. Look at how you might change your contribution.
4. Focus on how to successfully resolve the conflict and improve the relationship (how and when can I initiate a conversation about this).

We Assume Bad Intentions

Intentions matter, but other people's intentions are invisible to us. Our assumptions about intentions are usually wrong. So we make up attributions about their intentions based on the impact on us, and we often assume the worst. We may assume that we know what they intended and the goal is to let them know what they did wrong. We assume that the person was late on purpose or doesn't care about our needs. As with blaming, assuming bad intentions looks backward, not at resolving the conflict and improving the relationship.

The Solution to Assuming Bad Intentions:

1. Realize that we cannot know someone's intentions unless they tell us; our assumptions are usually wrong, we may assume the worst, and we usually treat ourselves more charitably.
2. Focus on what the person actually did (was late) or what they said.
3. Determine the impact their behavior had on you and why ("I felt frustrated because it was going to make us late for meeting up with our other friends").
4. Based on the impact of their behavior, be aware of any assumptions that you are making and realize that you don't know their intentions, if any, and that you are just guessing at their intentions. Maybe their concept of time is different than yours.
5. Focus on how to successfully resolve the conflict and improve the relationship (how and when can I initiate a conversation about this).

We Assume We Have All The Information And That We Are Right (and the other person is wrong or bad)

1. We may enter a situation believing we have all we need to know to understand what happened, and thus the goal becomes persuading the other person that we are right.
2. We may have different information (or incomplete information) or notice different things. There may have been a misunderstanding of the facts (we may not have made a firm decision about when to meet).
3. We focus only on information that confirms we are right and discount information that doesn't support our conclusions (e.g., that we decided when to meet and the other person agreed).
4. Our conclusions reflect our self-interests (that I am right, we decided when to meet, and you agreed).

The Solution to Assuming We Have All the Information and We Are Right

1. Realize that we may see things differently, that we may have different information and our information may be incomplete; that we make different interpretations and we may apply different rules (everyone should be exactly on time); and our conclusions reflect our self-interests (my need to always be exactly on time and others to do the same).
2. Shift from who's right to why do we see things differently.
3. Shift from being certain to curiosity. Realize that we may not have all the information.
4. Determine what I could ask to better understand each other's views. Ask Genuine Inquiry Questions to increase understanding. See the Listening Reading and the Listening Learning Experiences ([Relationship Skills & Healthy Relationships](#)) for more information on Genuine Inquiry Questions.
5. Focus on how to successfully resolve the conflict and improve the relationship, and not on who is right.

We Use “You Statements

Using “You Statements” usually makes people feel attacked and/or defensive. When people feel defensive and/or attacked, they are more likely to attack and less likely to listen to us, try to understand us, consider what we are saying, and even less likely to change their behavior to meet our needs.

Examples of “you” statements include:

Preaching.

You should...

Put Downs

Can't you do anything right

Criticism

You never do anything right, or you are always...

Giving Solutions

In the future, you should...

Threats/Ultimatums

If you don't... then I will...

Asking Why Out of Anger

Why did you do that?

The Solution to Using “You Statements”:

Use “I Statements”. Tell the person how you feel (“I feel frustrated when you are late”) and why (“because it makes us late for wherever we are going and I feel stressed not knowing if we will be on time”) and how you would like them to be in the future (“I’d appreciate it that when we agree to meet at a certain time that you be on time. Are you willing to do that?”) See the [“I Statements” Reading](#) and the [“I Statements” Learning Experience](#).

We Try To Control Their Response By Saying Things Like:

1. “Calm down” (“Why are you so upset that I was late?”)
2. “It’s not that bad” (“that I was late”)
3. What did you expect? (“This is who I am.”)
4. What you need to understand is... (“that you are too rigid. You need to be more flexible.”)
5. Here’s the answer (“You need to relax about this”)

The Solution to Trying To Control Someone’s Response:

1. Realize that people don’t like being controlled, and that trying to do so only makes the situation worse.
2. Realize that their feelings are legitimate
3. Listen to what they are saying.
4. Ask Genuine Inquiry Questions to better understand.
5. Avoid any attempts to tell someone how to behave.

We Focus on Positions Versus Interests.

1. A position is the stand we take in an argument or negotiation. It’s what we demand from the other side.
2. When we focus on positions (our demands) the real problem and the real needs are covered up.

The Solution to Focusing on Positions:

1. Focus on your and their interests. Interests are what we really want: our true needs, desires, and concerns.
2. In the “being late situation,” your real needs are to be on time, so that you aren’t stressed out about being late and missing out.
3. If we focus on what we and the other person really need, we can better find common ground and negotiate a solution that meets both of our needs.

We Can Also Avoid Making Others Feel Attacked, Defensive, or Threatened By Avoiding:

1. Being judgmental.
2. Presenting oneself as more senior, capable, popular, intelligent, or respected.
3. Interrupting, being sarcastic, rigid, and demanding
4. Making fun of someone's beliefs (e.g., "You can't be serious")
5. Attacking their identity (e.g., "you are a lousy parent")
6. Put-downs ("you're so old-fashioned")

What To Do When You Feel Defensive, Threatened, and/or Attacked

1. Take 2, 3, or more deep breaths.
2. Don't respond immediately.
3. Continue to breathe deeply.
4. Realize that although any accusations or judgments they are making may not be true, the feelings behind them are legitimate. Avoid responding in ways that make them feel defensive or attacked (see above). Try to understand their point of view.
5. You can slow things down by asking genuine inquiry questions, paraphrasing what they say, and acknowledging their feelings (active listening). This also communicates that you are trying to understand their feelings and needs. You will be unable to move the conversation in a more positive direction until the other person feels you are listening, understand them, and are considering what they are saying. Whenever you feel overwhelmed or unsure of how to proceed, remember that it is always a good time to listen.
6. If you are feeling attacked and that is making it difficult for you to listen, you can use an "I Statement" and say: "I am feeling attacked" or "I want to understand what you are saying, but I am having a hard time listening because I am feeling attacked."
7. Take a break. Tell the person you want to listen, understand, and consider what they are saying, but you are having a difficult time listening, and it is important for you to be able to do that. Reschedule a time to finish the conversations, 15 minutes to several days later.
8. Focus on successfully resolving the conflict and improving the relationship. Begin exploring options that meet your needs and theirs.

Summary

They and We Can Become Defensive, Feel Attacked, and Get Thrown Off Balance When We or They:

1. Blame
2. Assume bad intentions
3. Assume that we have all the information and we are right
4. Use “You Statements”
5. Try to control the other’s response
6. Try to change them

The Conversation Will Be More Effective If We:

1. Listen for Understanding
2. Ask Genuine Inquiry Questions
3. Use “I Statements”
4. Negotiate over needs versus positions.
5. Collaborate, Negotiate, and Problem Solve Together to Invent Solutions That Meets Your and the Other Person’s Needs.

Stages in Learning New Social Skills

When we learn new social skills like being an effective passive and active listener, skillful at asking genuine inquiry questions, and using “I Statements,” it is important to remember that these are complex skills that take time to master. As with any new social skill, most people go through the following stages before becoming proficient.

1. Feeling self-conscious and awkward.
2. Feelings of phoniness while using it. “This isn’t me”.
3. Skilled but mechanical.
4. It becomes automatic, and we don’t even know we are doing it. We use it effectively. We have internalized it.