

Steps to Successful Communication and Conflict Resolution

As long as organizations are comprised of individuals with different backgrounds, perspectives, and opinions, there will be conflict. Without conflict, we would never have change and improvement, so there is nothing wrong with conflict itself – the key is to resolve it as productively and painlessly as possible. Think of a communication issue or conflict you are experiencing, or have experienced, at work, and use the following steps to work through how you could best address it. These steps may not occur in order, you may have to repeat steps, you may follow two or more steps at once, or you may leave out a step, depending on what the circumstances require.

- 1) **Let go of blame, judgement, or any need to be “right” or to “win” the argument.** There is no such thing as right/wrong, good/bad, win/lose. Instead, there are two goals: 1) each person feels like they were heard and that their experience and feelings were validated and 2) both (or all) parties participate in collaborating on a mutually agreeable plan or solution. Remember that everybody’s experience of an event will be different based on their point of view and past experiences, but all experiences are equally valid.
- 2) **Gather information.** The more information and perspectives you can gather, the better able you will be to successfully collaborate in a solution. What pieces of the story could you get? What processes or policies might be involved? Who might have information that would be useful for a solution? What questions could you ask the person with whom you have the conflict?
- 3) **Gently, politely, and respectfully introduce *one* event to discuss using “I” statements and expressing feelings.** Do not allow the discussion of this one event to expand to multiple events and avoid using the words “never” and “always”. Remember that no one can “make” you feel a certain way; you react to events based on your past experiences and how you feel. Also remember that an individual’s actions are always more of a reflection of what’s going on inside of them, rather than a true reaction to another person’s behavior. Address issues as they occur; do not store things up. The longer you avoid discussing issues, the more difficult it becomes to resolve them.
- 4) **As you are introducing the issue, acknowledge personal experiences and behaviors that may have contributed to your upset.** In every situation, each individual brings their own experience of the event as well as their past experiences that may contribute to their perception of and feelings about what occurred. It’s important to acknowledge the contribution those past experiences make so that you are not expecting the other person to assume responsibility for events in which they were not involved. Since you are in a professional setting, you don’t need to be very specific, but a brief



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mention of behavior patterns or personality traits that could have contributed to your dissatisfaction or distress would help disarm the other individual.

- 5) **Listen to the other person's experience of the event, their feelings about the event, and past experiences that contributed to their experience of the event; summarize what they say.** When you summarize the individual's experience of the event, 1) they know you are listening and that you processed what they said and 2) they have the opportunity to correct your understanding of what they said.
- 6) **Empathize.** Even if the person does not say it out loud, notice how they are feeling, or try to extrapolate how they might feel given the circumstances. Validating somebody's feelings is a very powerful disarming tool and promotes open communication.
- 7) **Collaborate on a plan of action or a solution that makes both individuals happy.** The key here is to collaborate, not compromise. In compromise, both parties lose something. In collaboration, both parties gain something when they work together to develop a satisfactory "third" solution.
- 8) **Document and follow up.** After your conversation, write the person an email thanking them for their time and describing your shared solution. The purpose of this email is to have a written record to refer to if necessary, and to give the individual the opportunity to correct your understanding.
- 9) **Reinforce.** When you notice that the other person is following the plan or the solution, comment on it and thank them. If you notice that one or both of you are not following the plan, gently bring it up and determine whether the plan needs to be adjusted. You may need to follow the steps again, or you may need to get a third party involved.