

# CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE WORKPLACE

By Deborah Mackin

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The heat generated in a conflict creates in most of us a "fight" or "flight" response. Those who fight aim for victory without regard for their victims. They take an extreme position, issue threats, and demand concessions. Those people who run away from conflict believe a "peace at any price" approach will save relationships. They're quick to accept losses and yield to pressure.

Experts agree that both are no-win approaches to conflict resolution. Each produces an unsatisfactory agreement with resulting anger and resentment.

The principled approach, developed by the Harvard Negotiation Project, offers a third option: shift from assuming positions to identifying common interests. For example, rather than assuming that people are friends or enemies, both parties become problem-solvers. To do this successfully requires a four stage approach:

## **1. Separate the people from the problem.**

Claire marches into your office to complain about the number of errors John makes on his reports. John is directly behind her shouting that Claire is to blame because she always gives him the data late and expects miracles. Both seek victory. Using the principled approach, you say, "I can see you are both upset and can understand why, but can we look at the problem and possible solutions rather than focusing on who's to blame?"

Although they both periodically digress into name-calling, you maintain a single-mindedness on problem identification. John finally suggests that communication is the problem; Claire agrees. Bingo! They've taken the first step away from positional arguing.

Your goal in the first stage is to allow both individuals to discuss their perceptions of the problem, acknowledge their emotions as legitimate, and obtain mutual agreement on the definition of the problem.

## **2. Focus on interests, not positions.**

While Claire agrees that communication is the problem, she's quick to point out that John, as her subordinate, should be responsible for initiating communication when he doesn't understand her data. John counters that Claire is his superior and should be responsible for giving better instructions. You quickly head off their growing discontent by asking: "What is your goal with these reports?" John and Claire agree that their goal is an accurate, timely document that can be used to make wise decisions.

Your objective in the second stage is to look for the mutual interests of both parties. If the parties fail to identify common interests, you might begin by stating, "I see some areas of agreement here," or "Can we agree that . . . ?"

### **3. Generate options before deciding what to do.**

The focus now is to determine how to communicate to ensure an accurate, timely report. Here John and Claire are asked to generate many possibilities. Claire states that weekly meetings might help; John suggests that a standardized form would show where data was missing. Both agree to see ways to solve the problem.

In stage three you seek to separate the act of inventing options from the act of judging them. You might state, "Let's come up with as many ideas as possible to get an accurate report out in a timely manner." You could shift the focus off the report by asking: "Are there other methods that would provide the information we need to make wise decisions?"

### **4. Insist on objective criteria.**

Claire and John had entered your office determined to maintain their positions. Throughout the discussion, you have focused on objective criteria: defining the problem, identifying the goal, and listing alternative solutions. Objective criteria should include: agreement on fair procedures, agreement to reason and be open to reason, and agreement never to yield to pressure tactics.

As John and Claire start to leave your office, they are trying to identify what categories should be listed on the standardized form. You interrupt their discussion with a final question: "What rules are you both willing to live with as you work on the problem?" Both agree to communicate regularly until they have reached the best solution.

The same approach to conflict resolution can be used when you are a party in the conflict. Begin by stating "I want to know the rules of the game we're going to play. Are we both trying to reach a wise agreement with as little effort as possible, or are we going to play 'hard bargaining' where only the most stubborn of us will win?" While the other person stops to consider your question, you have time to shift your thinking from a positional to a principled approach.

As Fisher and Ury state in *Getting to Yes*, "Principled negotiation employs no tricks and no posturing. It enables you to be fair while protecting you against those who would take advantage of your fairness. Whether there is one issue or several; two parties or many; a prescribed ritual or an impromptu free-for-all, principled negotiation is an all-purpose strategy."