Understanding Conflict Management: Five Important Skills
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There are discreet skills and attitudes, habits if you will, that can elevate your conflict practice to a new level. This article shares a selection of habits and attitudes that can transform a good conflict resolver into a highly effective one. By that I mean someone who facilitates productive, meaningful discussion between others that results in deeper self-awareness, mutual understanding and workable solutions.

We’re using the term ‘conflict resolver’ intentionally to reinforce the idea that we all can be instrumental in ending disputes, regardless of whether they are also mediators. These conflict management techniques are life skills that are useful in whatever setting you find yourself. With these skills, you can create environments that are respectful, collaborative and conducive to problem-solving. And, you’ll teach others to be proactive, by modeling successful conflict management behaviors.

1. UNDERSTAND EVERYONE’S NEEDS

It’s natural for anyone involved in a dispute to jump right in to handle conflict. When someone visits you to discuss a personality conflict, you assess a situation, determine the next steps and proceed until the problem is solved. But is that helpful?

When you take charge, the people in the conflict are relieved of their responsibility to find a solution. That leaves you to do the work around finding alternatives. And while you want to do what’s best for this person and everyone involved, it’s important to ask what everyone wants first-- whether it’s to vent, brainstorm solutions or get some coaching. Understand what the person coming to you wants by asking questions:

• How can I be most helpful to you?
• What are you hoping I will do?
• What do you see my role as in this matter?
2. ENGAGE IN COLLABORATIVE LISTENING

Collaborative Listening takes those active listening or reflective listening skills one step further. It recognizes that in listening each person has a job that supports the needs and wants of the other. The speaker’s job is to clearly express his or her thoughts, feelings and goals. The listener’s job is facilitating clarity; understanding and make the each person in the conflict feel heard.

So what’s the difference? The distinction is acknowledgement. Your role can be to help the each person gain a deeper understanding of everyone’s interests and needs; to define concepts and words in a way that expresses their values (i.e. respect means something different to each one of us); and to make her feel acknowledged—someone sees things from all points of view.

Making an acknowledgement is tricky in group settings. Understandably, you want to help the each person in the conflict but are mindful of the issues of the whole group. You can acknowledge each person’s needs even while safeguarding the needs of the group as a whole.

Simply put, acknowledgement does not mean agreement. It means letting everyone know that you can see how they got to their viewpoint or opinion. It doesn’t mean taking sides with someone or abandoning your responsibilities to the group. Acknowledgement can be the bridge across misperceptions. Engage in Collaborative Listening by:

• Help each person to explore and be clear about their interests and goals
• Acknowledge their perspective by saying phrases like:
  I can see how you might see it that way.
  That must be difficult for you.
  I understand that you feel _______ about this.
• Ask questions that probe for deeper understanding on both your parts:
  When you said x, what did you mean by that?
  If ______ happens, what’s significant about that for you?
  What am I missing in understanding this from your perspective?

3. BE A GOOD TRANSMITTER
Messages transmitted from one person to the next are very powerful. Sometimes people have to hear it ‘from the horse’s mouth’. Other times, you’ll have to be the transmitter of good thoughts and feelings. Pick up those ‘gems’, those positive messages that flow when others feel safe and heard in mediation, and present them to the other person. Your progress will improve.

We’re all human. You know how easy it is to hold a grudge, or assign blame. Sharing gems appropriately can help each a person begin to shift their perceptions of the situation, and more importantly, of each other. To deliver polished gems, try to:

- Act soon after hearing the gem
- Paraphrase accurately so the words aren’t distorted
- Ask the listener if this is new information and if changes her stance
- Avoid expecting the people involved to visibly demonstrate a ‘shift in stance’ (it happens internally and on their timetable, not ours)

4. RECOGNIZE POWER

Power is a dominant factor in mediation that raises many questions: What is it? Who has it? How to do you balance power? Assumptions about who is the ‘powerful one’ are easy to make and sometimes wrong. Skillful conflict resolvers recognize power dynamics in conflicts and are mindful about how to authentically manage them. You can recognize power by being aware that:

- Power is fluid and exchangeable
- People possess power over the content and their process (think of a person’s concerns as the water flowing into and being held by the container)
- Resolvers possess power over the mediation process (their knowledge, wisdom, experience, and commitment form the container)
- Your roles as a conflict resolver will have a significant impact on power dynamics

5. BE OPTIMISTIC & RESILIENT

Agreeing to participate in conflict management or resolution is an act of courage and hope. By participating, people are conveying their belief in value of the relationship. They are also expressing their trust in you to be responsive to and
supportive of our efforts. A person may first communicate their anger, frustration, suffering, righteousness, regret, not their best hopes. You can inspire them to continue by being optimistic:

- Be positive about your experiences with conflict management
- Hold their best wishes and hopes for the future
- Encourage them to work towards their hopes

Be Resilient. Remember the last time you were stuck in a conflict? You probably replayed the conversation in your mind over and over, thinking about different endings and scolding yourself. The others can get stuck, too. In fact, they can become so worn down and apathetic about their conflict, especially a long-standing dispute; they’d do anything to end it.

Yes, even agree with each other prematurely. Don’t let them settle. Mediation is about each person getting his or her interest met. Be resilient:

- Be prepared to move yourself and the others through productive and less productive cycles of the mediation
- Help the others see their movement and progress
- Be mindful and appreciative of the hard work you all are doing