

# Just Do It: Dealing With Emotions In Conflict

**C**onflict is not merely a disagreement. If it was just a disagreement, you wouldn't be so mad. No, conflict is a disagreement infused with strong emotions. And when you get angry in conflict, you don't control your emotions—your emotions control you. That's why conflict is so ugly.

In order to deal with the substantive issues in the conflict, you have to deal with the emotions, and you have to do that first. That's the bad news. The good news is that when you deal with the emotions of conflict well, you are poised to problem-solve the issues of the conflict creatively and collaboratively.

This article is about the emotions of conflict: how emotions affect us in conflict, taking the first step to dealing with them constructively, and what to do when you're in the trenches of conflict.

## How Conflict Affects Us

Think of your most recent conflict—when you really got into it with someone. Did you notice how you felt afterwards? Your whole body was buzzing. You felt drained. Your hands trembled. Your hairs stood on end. Your face got red. You got hot. Your hands got clammy. Perhaps you can't even describe how you felt, but you know that your whole body participated in the conflict, and you felt battered in the aftermath—even if you "won."

Conflict stimulates a primitive fight or flight response in our bodies that gets our stress hormones racing. This explains the physiological symptoms we experience in a conflict; our bodies have gone

on high alert. As the blood rushes to our extremities (to help us fight or flee), it is notably not rushing to our brains to solve the problem. While the body prepares for battle, the mind supports it. The more primitive part of our brain is fully engaged and has relegated the more evolved part of the brain to the sidelines. The brain's thinking in this state relates more to battle than to coming up with elegant solutions.

For example, let's listen in to a slice of conflict at work:

"Will you stop hassling me about the deadline?"

"I'm not hassling you. I'm just trying to find out when you'll get it done."

"If you'd stop bothering me about it I'd get it done."

"Then why haven't you already done it? I haven't talked to you about it for a week."

In conflict, your brain is obsessed. All it can tell you is that you are right, which means that the other person is wrong. This becomes so powerful that your mind can't take in any information. You send out the message like a busy signal: "You

are wrong... You are wrong... You are wrong." (Even if your words don't say it, your tone of voice and body language do.) Of course, the other person is doing the same thing.

When in the midst of conflict, it feels like resolution can only happen if the other person not only sees your point of view, but capitulates to it. It's not enough to broadcast that I am right and you are wrong; we must convince the other person of it. You're as likely to do that as win the lottery. It might happen, but the odds are against you.

## The First Step: Have Faith, and Use the Skills

The first step is to break out of the cycle of anger and defensiveness. The only way to do this is to stop talking, breathe, and start listening. In order to do this, you must first have faith. You must have confidence that in trying to understand someone else, you will be understood. You must believe that in acknowledging the other person's needs, you can still honor your own. You must know that listening to emotions will not fuel them, but will help them subside. You must trust that you will respect yourself more for trying to resolve the conflict, than for pushing your point of view. You must accept that the first step

toward truly winning feels like losing. You must have faith in listening-- specifically in reflecting.\*

Even more, you must have faith in yourself as you use the skills. You don't have to believe that you're great at reflecting. You don't have to pretend that you're the wizard of communication. What you need is to believe in your own desire for the greater good: mutual understanding. Reflecting is only the means to that end. Knowing this will help you when you start reflecting. You're not going to feel that reflecting is working right away. Your belief in the skills, and in yourself as you use the skills, will help you stay the course at this difficult transition.

What fuels faith in yourself and the skills is knowing that there's a better way, and that continuing in conflict creates damage that will be difficult to clean up later. In the end, the benefits of resolving conflict give you greater gains than you could ever imagine when you're in the conflict. The side of conflict that you can see in the heat of battle is filled with irritation, frustration, illogic, small-minded solutions, and disrespect. On the other side of conflict is mutual understanding, clear thinking, respect, good will, collaboration, and creative problem solving. If you've ever had a good experience resolving conflict, you already know this other side of conflict. It's exciting to be on that new ground.

In order to use the skills of conflict, you must first be committed to getting to that new ground. Your higher purpose cannot be simply to further your own point of

view. If it is, you have no real incentive to listen. If, however, you care about what the other person wants or needs, if you want to shepherd a mutually beneficial solution, then "all" you need to do in conflict is this: tune in to that moment of insight when you say to yourself, "This is going nowhere." Accept your feelings of anger, frustration, hurt, and irritation. Accept the fact that they're not going to get you where you want to go. Put your attention outside of yourself; that's where the conflict will be resolved. Know that your purpose is to get at least your own needs met, and even to guide both of you to a win-win solution. In light of this, do what needs doing. Use the skills of conflict management to hear through emotions and clarify needs.

### **Bridge to the Other Side of Conflict**

Getting to the other side of conflict is not easy. In fact, starting to use the skills of conflict management is the hardest part of the process. Once you start to use the skills, it gets much easier. The transition is the most difficult moment. Here are three things you can do to find the bridge to the other side of conflict.

#### **Stop Talking**

Just stop talking. The other person won't mind if you stop talking. In fact, he or she will be delighted at having more time to talk. You can take the time to think about what you want to do or say. You can listen, or at least try to talk yourself out of getting mad.

#### **Breathe**

Breathe. Do it now.

Really. Right now.

Take a deep breath in, then let it out. Ahhh.

Did you do it? Do you feel how your body is different?

If you breathe deeply, you can break the hold of your primitive response. You can help re-direct blood flow, and tame the wild hormones. You can have your rational body back. You can let go of your need to talk. (Don't worry, you're not going to forget what you needed to say. You'll never forget what's important.) You can start to understand what that idiot is saying. And it starts to make sense. All this accomplished by breathing. These don't have to be obvious deep breaths (as in, please excuse me while I meditate). They can be as subtle as you like. But fight physiology with physiology.

#### **Start with "You"**

And that's not as in, "You jerk!" but as in, "You believe... You feel... You think..." That's right: reflections. These will be the most inelegant, primitive reflections you have ever made. That doesn't matter; you have to start somewhere. So start with "you." And stop pushing your own ideas. (Don't worry, you'll get your turn.)

Not only is listening in conflict counter-intuitive, not only is it hard, but it's not pretty either. When you start reflecting in conflict, that first reflection is going to be terrible, and probably so are the ones following it. Even if you don't want to be angry or sarcastic, your reflections may sound that way. You may completely miss

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\* Reflecting is when you respond by describing briefly and in your own words the core of what the other person has communicated. This is the short description of reflecting. There are many skills to be learned in mastering the art of reflecting, more than can be described in this article. The book People Skills by Ridge founder Bob Bolton, and Ridge's People Skills course both go into extensive detail on the master skill of reflecting.

the mark. Just keep plowing ahead, listening, trying to understand, and letting go of your own strong feelings. Changing your attitude, emotions and physiology won't happen immediately, and you have to wade through your own strong emotions and hormones to find an island of calm and openness. Have faith that reflecting will take you there. Even so, you might have some questions.

### Questions You'll Have When You're in the Trenches

#### What am I reflecting?

As you listen to the other person talk, try to understand both the emotions and needs hidden within what they're saying. As much as you'd rather not listen to the other person's emotions, that's the fastest and most powerful way toward resolutions of the conflict. You don't have to take their emotions personally. In fact, reflecting allows you to hear their emotions without taking them personally. You can hear that the other person is angry without instantly reacting to it.

#### What are the emotions of conflict?

Anger and frustration are the most apparent emotions of conflict. In truth, however, they are usually a mask for another emotion: hurt, fear, helplessness, or lack of control. Anger and frustration are the bodyguards for these other more vulnerable emotions. If you can get past the tough bodyguard, you'll find the softer emotions at the root of the issue.

If you acknowledge these emotions, however, sometimes the other person may not acknowledge that you're right. Some people may feel too vulnerable to acknowledge these emotions or hear them said. Even if people don't acknowledge these emotions, you saying them aloud may release the other person from emotions' grip.

#### Why do I have to listen to emotions?

It's worth listening to emotions because they lead you to the source of the conflict. For example, someone may be angry with you because you didn't include them in a memo. If you listen, you might hear the cascade of emotions. The person is:

1. frustrated with the way he or she hears about new projects at a company, then
2. irritated at not being included at the beginning of other new projects, then
3. hurt that his or her contributions are not valued.

That final emotion is what is really bothering the person. It's not just about whether or not you included his or her name on the memo. If you didn't listen, you'd be hung up justifying why you didn't copy him or her on the memo. If you don't listen to the emotions, you'll be listening to him or her gripe that "Nobody ever tells me what's going on." Emotions guide you through what's unimportant and lead you to what's most important. That's why it's worth listening to them, even if it makes you uncomfortable. Once our needs are clear, emotions return to normal.

When you follow the path of emotions, you're not just listening for emotions but for the needs that they guard. The needs can be tangible (e.g., funding) or intangible (e.g., recognition). You can't usually get to the need without acknowledging the emotion. However, it's not the emotions that are at the end of the line, but the need. As you listen for the need, ask yourself, why does this matter so much to that person? Be curious. That's hard to do in conflict. We're more likely to be impatient or exasperated than curious. Being curious will help you listen for needs. Treat the situation like a puzzle to be solved. Expect the needs to unfold rather than to be immediately apparent. Listen-

ing, with the right intent, will bring you quickly to the needs.

#### What about me?

Hey, you're wondering, what about me? What about my emotions? What about my needs? No one is listening to me! That's right, and don't expect them to. But get over it. You're already taking care of yourself, by calming yourself down and starting to think rationally. After you've started listening, following the path to the other person's real needs, the pressure to persuade is lessened. You can then search inside for what you truly need.

#### What do I need?

Although in conflict you were so sure of what you needed, once you return to rational thinking, you start to sift through what it is that you really need. As you take your turn to speak (after a lot of listening), you'll find yourself clarifying what you need and what you don't need. You may have to repeat it several times before the other person hears it. (Remember, they're not listening; if they heard anything at all, it was that thing you shouldn't have said in the heat of the moment.) As you repeat it, challenge yourself to clearly articulate what you do need, and to cast aside what's unimportant. Your needs will rise to the surface of your speaking. Strangely enough, the other person starts to become interested in what you're saying. After all, his or her needs have been heard, and the emotions are subsiding.

### Beyond the Skills

The hardest part of conflict is when you just start to use the skills. Your reflecting will most likely be terrible. You'll still be trying to keep your own emotions at bay while you deal with the heat of someone else's emotions. You won't want to try to understand this other person (the idiot) when you force yourself to listen and

make sense of what's being said. You'll feel defensive, perhaps, but can't lash out at the other person. Reflecting in conflict is like walking in a blizzard. You just have to keep putting one foot in front of the other, having faith that even if you can't see where you'll end up, that this method will get you there. Listening to emotions, for the needs that they're protecting, is the very difficult work that you're doing when you use the skills of conflict management.

Conflict management skills don't solve the problem for you. They aren't in place of apology, if that's needed. They don't prevent you from needing to come up with a different solution. They only lead you to the place where you might be able to solve the problem. Sometimes conflicts can't be resolved and the only outcome you can be proud of is that it wasn't worse.

Because conflict is emotional, you have to deal with the emotions in order to deal with the substantive issues of the conflict. You can't solve problems when people are either expressing or suppressing emotions. But once you can find the needs that emotions are guarding, and those needs and emotions can be said out loud, the stage is set for successful problem solving.