



Avoid Conflict At All Costs

That is not a recommendation. It's an unfortunate reality in our human interactions. Most of us postpone dealing with difficult people, sensitive issues and challenging conversations. It's uncomfortable, awkward and downright scary at times. We lack a framework for which to start the conversation. How do you go about changing your conflict-avoiding ways?

It's more than being direct.

Oftentimes I observe individuals who think because they are direct, (aka "blunt") in their communications that they have no conflict to resolve. They feel they've made their point clear and often feel so strongly in their position that they leave little to no room for discussion. This can be especially true for people in positions of authority. This approach does little to truly resolve issues or create an environment for optimal decision-making or innovation. Nor does it do much to cultivate strong, trustworthy relationships.

It's NOT walking on eggshells.

The pendulum of bluntness can show up in being so overly sensitive that you feel like you're walking on eggshells. You become excessively concerned about what you say and how you say it. In this case, if you do attempt to address the problem, it's in a vague manner that clouds the issue and diminishes its seriousness. The person with whom you are talking misses the point and usually doesn't appreciate what's at stake.

The negative consequences of avoiding issues

What happens during the time span between recognizing an issue and finally addressing it? Generally, we make assumptions and we create entire stories and motives for what's going on. We also inadvertently take it personally and build up resentment based on a tangled web of fabricated, unchecked, beliefs. This can quickly deteriorate the relationship and bog down progress.

So, when should you address an issue?

I believe in addressing the issue as soon as possible. If key performance indicators are not being met, or other team members are grumbling about their colleague, or your gut simply tells you something is not right, *have the conversation*. Don't wait until it's convenient, or you've finely crafted your message, or a formal performance review, or you've dug up enough data to prove you're right or whatever excuse you conjure up. The sooner you address it, the better.

That's doesn't mean you can't be prepared for tough conversations. Below is a framework to jump start the issue resolution dialogue:



1. **Name the issue.** Be specific about what's not working or what you see is causing grief.
2. **Give 1-3 examples** to illustrate the behavior or situation you want to see changed (oftentimes people are not aware of the issue that you may feel is blatantly obvious, and they may initially be defensive but when properly illustrated, they are more likely to see the problem).
3. **Let the individual know how it makes you feel** (frustrated, unsettled, disappointed, disrespected, unappreciated, etc.).
4. Then, **explain what exactly is at stake** if this issue continues unaddressed. Is the project in jeopardy of losing money? Is the company's reputation at stake? Is their job at risk? Is their relationship with their colleagues a concern?
5. **Identify your own contribution to the problem.** What have you done to play a role? Have you tolerated it longer than you should have? Did you elevate someone into a position they weren't ready for? Did you fail to explain your expectations for the outcome? Were you not accessible to them for guidance or decision-making? Did you provide enough resources of time, money or staff?
6. Express your desire to **resolve the issue.**
7. **Invite that person to respond.**

Be prepared to truly listen. Make an honest inquiry into his/her view. To demonstrate your full understanding, be sure to paraphrase what you heard and acknowledge their perspective. Be cautious of any "rabbit holes" they may try to take you down. Keep them focused; addressing the issue and not filling the conversation with reasons or excuses. Remember, the point of the conversation is to resolve the issue at hand.

Reaching Understanding & Resolution

The conversation should reveal a deeper mutual understanding. Check in with each other to see if anything has been left unsaid. What did you both learn? How should you move forward? Make an agreement about how to proceed and how to hold each other accountable.

Being adept at addressing conflict promptly, respectfully and optimally requires conscious and diligent practice. As you build this skill you will find yourself rewarded immensely. Your team will begin to expect that you'll come to them with an issue as soon as it arises. It reduces friction and assumptions while significantly increasing trust -which in turn breeds initiative and productivity.

There's a management phrase that states: "We get what we tolerate". You no longer need to tolerate the inefficiencies, stressors and complications that come with avoiding conflict. What are you waiting for? Who do you need to talk to? What's the topic? Initiate it in a new way today.