

Quick Skills Series

HANDLING CONFLICT

How to Resolve Workplace Tensions



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How to Resolve Workplace Tensions



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Quick Skills Series

Handling Conflict

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Quick Skills Series

Expand your professional career skills by combining several *Quick Skills* books into your own customized learning plan.

Skills for the First-Time Supervisor

New supervisors face similar challenges. While used to being responsible for their own efforts, they often feel nervous about being judged by the work of those under their supervision. This quick, preparatory course focuses on key concepts and abilities.

Customer Service

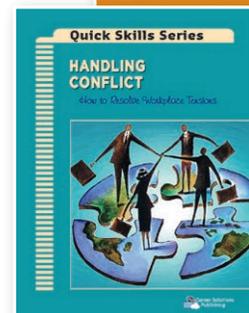
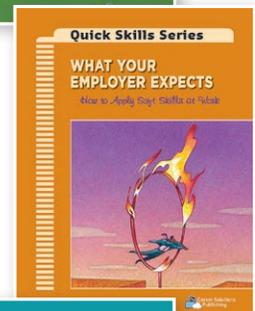
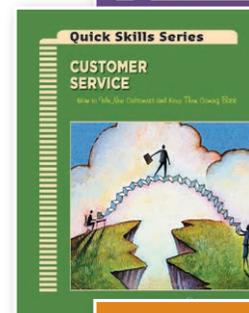
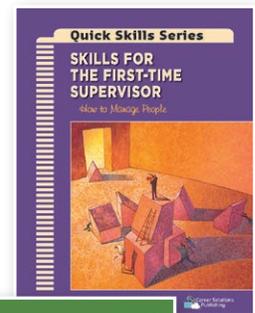
Putting the customer first is how you keep current customers and entice new ones to use your company's products or services. Giving customers what they want, increasing customer loyalty, and eliminating customer dissatisfaction is the focus of this book.

What Your Employer Expects

Starting out strong is important for any newly-hired employee, and enhancing your skills, behaviors, and attitudes that employers want is the key to long-term success. You will learn strategies and receive recommendations and guidelines to assist in this process.

Handling Conflict

Understanding why conflict arises and how to better manage it is a skill that can be learned; however, the process requires understanding oneself and others. With this book, you will cultivate the skills necessary for handling conflict in an effective and constructive manner.



Watch for these upcoming *Quick Skills Series* books

- Entrepreneurship Skills • Decision Making and Problem Solving
- Teamwork • Managing Change • Self-Management and Goal Setting
- Attitude and Self-Esteem • Advancing Your Career

Employability Skills

Employability skills, sometimes called soft skills, have become the hard skills of today's workforce. They are the power skills that differentiate exceptional employees from only adequate employees. With powerful employability skills, you will rise faster and further in your career.

Important research conducted by Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation and Stanford Research Center concluded that 85% of job success comes from having well-developed employability skills, and only 15% of job success comes from technical skills and knowledge, previously known as the hard skills. Employers worldwide say that many applicants do not possess acceptable employability skills and, therefore, are unprepared for work in a fast-changing, technological society.

Being able to handle conflict effectively is an employability skill that is highly valued by employers. Individuals who remain objective and non-defensive during conflict, and who view debate and critical feedback as important for improving their job skills, gain the respect of their supervisors and coworkers. The ability to control one's emotions and behaviors during conflict is a significant professional asset. In this Quick Skills book *Handling Conflict*, you will learn strategies to enhance your own abilities when faced with challenging conflict in your work.

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Handling Conflict

Contents

Introduction	1
Workshop 1: Use and Abuse of Conflict	3
What Is Conflict?	4
Is Conflict Always Bad?	7
Constructive vs. Destructive Conflict	10
Workshop 2: Receiving Advice and Criticism	13
Getting Defensive	14
Learning to Listen: Four Key Steps	16
Encouraging Feedback	19
Workshop 3: Giving Advice and Criticism	23
Constructive vs. Destructive Comments	24
Dealing with Personal Behavior	27
Using “I” Messages	29
Preparing to Get It Right: Facts, Time, Place	31
Workshop 4: Aggressiveness vs. Assertiveness	35
Assertive or Aggressive: What’s the Difference?	36
Characteristics of Assertive Behavior	39
Perceiving Aggressiveness in Others	41
Workshop 5: Handling Anger	45
The Nature of Anger	46
The Responsibility for Anger	49
To Let It Out or Keep It In	50
Seven Steps for Managing Anger	52

continued on next page

Contents

continued

Handling Conflict

Workshop 6: Preventing Conflict	57
“An Ounce of Prevention”	58
Problems of Perception and Interpretation	58
Stereotypes: A Necessary Evil?	62
Behavior Patterns	66
Workshop 7: Managing Conflict	69
Conflict Management Strategies	70
Successful Collaboration	74
Dealing with Another Person’s Anger	78
Workshop 8: Being a Peacemaker	81
Intervening in Conflicts	82
Being a Mediator	83
Twelve Steps to Effective Mediation	86
Checklist	89-90



Handling Conflict

Conflicts are an inevitable part of life. Throughout our history on earth, we human beings have struggled with one another. Although philosophers and religious leaders have urged us to embrace peace and quiet, we continue to argue and clash—and sometimes we even seem to enjoy it.

This book is not about the major battles involved in war and politics. Rather, it is about the kinds of conflicts you experience on an almost daily basis, at work and also among your friends and family. The way you handle these conflicts can have a major impact on your success, your happiness, and your fulfillment in life. There are two basic assumptions behind this book:

1. Some ways of handling conflict are more effective than others—that is, more likely to result in positive outcomes.
2. The skills for handling conflict can be learned. Even if you're not adept at them now, you can improve through understanding and practice.

In the workshops that follow, you'll explore several different aspects of conflict and learn important skills that can help you manage conflicts effectively. You'll see how to get a handle on conflict so that it can

work to your advantage. In fact, you'll discover how to make many conflicts work to the mutual advantage of both you and your opponents.

To get a sense of your current approach to conflict, try the self-assessment on the next page. For each statement, mark the response that best applies to you.



Peace is not the absence of conflict. It is the ability to handle conflict by peaceful means.

— **RONALD REAGAN**
U.S. President

Introduction

To get a sense of your current approach to conflict, try this self-assessment. For each statement, mark the response that best applies to you. Don't spend a long time pondering each answer. Just choose the answer that seems most appropriate right now.

	Often	Sometimes	Never
1. I'm unhappy about the conflict at my job.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. I'm upset when people criticize me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. People get annoyed when I give them good advice.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. I find it hard to assert my own rights and opinions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. When people disagree with me, the argument gets personal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. I raise my voice in arguments.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. I get frustrated and angry, even though others may not know it.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. In a dispute, people tell me I've misinterpreted the situation.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9. To avoid a fight, I just give in.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10. If it comes to a showdown, I make sure I win.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11. If someone shows anger toward me, I get really upset.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
12. When other people are fighting about something that doesn't involve me directly, I make a point of ignoring the trouble.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How many times did you check “Often” or “Sometimes”? Although there are no absolute rules that apply in every conflict, each of the twelve statements describes a response that tends to produce a negative outcome. Usually there are more productive ways to think, feel, and behave during a conflict.

In this book you'll find many suggestions and activities that can help you identify productive ways of handling conflict and put them into practice in your own life.

Use and Abuse of Conflict

Amber has a big problem with Frank in Purchasing at the construction firm where they work. Recently, Amber was asked to help prepare a bid for a new city recreation center. This is an unusual project for the firm, in part because the plans call for collaborating with a local artist on mosaic tile work. To figure out the cost of the special materials, she needs Frank's help.

Frank has been with the company about 125 years, Amber supposes. He's grumpy, set in his ways, and disrespectful of young people like her. This morning, when she showed him the specifications for the tiles, he grunted, "Can't get 'em."

"What do you mean?" she retorted. "I've listed three possible sources. All you have to do is ask for prices."

"We don't deal with those places," he declared. "Besides, these specs are too vague."

"I don't have details yet. We need a ballpark estimate, that's all. And why can't we deal with new suppliers?" she questioned.

Frank rolled his eyes and ignored her.

"Listen," she snapped, "I was told I had to work with you on these costs.

If you won't cooperate, I'm going to tell the boss you're just a—" (she swallowed several nasty words) "—a giant clog in the works," she concluded.

"Oh, you go ahead and do that," he grinned. "Meanwhile, Mr. Clog's

gonna file these papers for you." And he tossed her carefully prepared specs into a wastebasket.

Since then, Amber has been fuming. Should she storm back and confront Frank? Should she inform the boss that she

can no longer work with Frank?

Should she tell her coworkers about the incident in the hope that everyone will shun him? While she weighs these options, she is too upset to get any work done.



What's Inside

Here, you will learn to

- ◆ define conflict
- ◆ identify beneficial aspects of conflict
- ◆ recognize when conflict is constructive

Workshop



What Is Conflict?

A conflict exists when one person's attempt to reach his or her goals interferes with another person's attempt to do the same. As Amber's story demonstrates, conflict can rear its head at almost any time in a work environment. It can build up over a long time, or it can flare suddenly. It may be based on genuine disagreements about the job, but it can be fueled by many other things: pressures that the individuals are feeling, frustrations, fears, personal dislikes, and more.

Amber's goal is to do her job well, and she sees her efforts being blocked by Frank, whose goal may be to prevent interference with his cherished way of doing things. As they begin to clash over goals, many negative emotions and behaviors come into play. Frank patronizes and dismisses Amber. She threatens him and calls him a name. Now the situation is getting out of hand.

Of course, conflict doesn't have to be so open or obvious. Perhaps the nastiest conflicts in organizations are the ones papered over by smiles and hearty greetings. If you feel that someone who pretends to like you is really stabbing you in the back, you're in conflict.



Disagreement vs. Conflict

It's important to realize that mere disagreement is not conflict. Say that you advocate Plan A, and a coworker of yours advocates Plan B. At a meeting you both present your arguments; the two of you disagree strongly, maybe even loudly. This isn't necessarily conflict. It wouldn't be conflict unless one of you felt the other was blocking the achievement of a personal goal. If the dominant goal for both of you is reaching the best decision for the company, and you are both willing to accept that there are different opinions about how to proceed, you can continue to work together without conflict.



Personality Traits That Promote Conflict

Are there some types of people who, by their very nature, rub others the wrong way? That is, do certain personality traits make people more prone to conflict? Psychologists and organization theorists generally believe this is true. Although such personality traits are hard to identify and measure, the following characteristics, among others, seem to promote conflict:

- ◆ Authoritarian attitudes
- ◆ Arrogance
- ◆ Insistence on the truth of a belief that cannot be proved
- ◆ Strong need to control things
- ◆ Fear of uncertainty

Did you know?

According to a survey by Accountemps, managers in major U.S. corporations spend more than four weeks a year handling problems caused by employees who can't get along with one another.

Consequences of Conflict

What are some of the consequences of conflict in the workplace? You can probably think of several immediately. People who study organizations have described many damages caused by conflict, including these:

- ◆ Energy is diverted from important organizational goals.
- ◆ Tasks that depend on cooperation don't get done properly.
- ◆ Both parties to the conflict feel increased stress and frustration, which in turn can affect their ability to do their job.
- ◆ The "losers" in a conflict often feel demeaned or not respected, and this can affect their commitment to the organization as a whole.
- ◆ Often the conflict spreads to other people, forcing them to choose sides and poisoning many relationships throughout the organization. Morale declines, suspicion and distrust mount, and job satisfaction suffers. Absenteeism rises.
- ◆ As hostilities escalate, some people may get fired. Others may quit because they can't stand the atmosphere. In either case, turnover increases, and the organization may struggle to keep a competent and productive staff.
- ◆ Clients or customers notice that something is wrong in the organization, and they begin to take their business elsewhere.

ACTIVITY 1.1

NAME _____

Looking at a Conflict of Your Own

Think about a conflict you've had within the last few years, either at work or in another part of your life. Answer the following questions:

1. How did it start?

2. What emotions became involved?

Your emotions:

The other person's emotions (as you understand them):

3. Did the conflict escalate to involve other people? How and why?

4. List any negative consequences that resulted:

5. Looking back, do you think you should have handled the conflict differently? Explain your answer.

Is Conflict Always Bad?

Obviously conflict is often harmful, both for the people involved and for the organization where they work. Even the “winner” of a conflict may suffer from all the stress and hostility aroused. But does conflict always have to be bad?

Let’s look at some ways in which conflict—if handled properly—may actually benefit an organization.

Conflict and the Balancing of Goals

As you’ve seen, conflict involves competing goals, but isn’t it natural in any organization that goals compete with one another?

Imagine that a research director for a software firm wants to spend money to develop new products. The corporation’s controller, meanwhile, wants to hold down costs. These goals often contradict each other, and this can lead to conflict between the two people. But to us, looking in from outside, it’s clear that both goals are good. The company should try to develop new software, and at the same time it should exercise some control over spending.

Clearly, in a case like this, the company needs to find a balance between the opposing goals. If some degree of conflict between the research manager and controller helps the company find the right balance, then the conflict, in that sense, is useful.



Conflict and Creativity

Good decision making also demands creativity—the ability to come up with new solutions. Conflict, if it’s not too hostile, often stimulates creativity.

In other words, conflict can make the competing individuals, and those around them, think harder

and more inventively.

It tends to increase both the number of ideas considered and the originality of those ideas. In our example of conflict in the software firm, the research director may think of innovative ways to design and test new products without spending so much money. Meanwhile,

the controller may be inspired by the conflict to find more ways to stretch the budget.

“

If there is no struggle,
there is no progress.

— **FREDERICK DOUGLASS**

*American Social Reformer
and Statesman*

”

Other benefits of conflict

Besides its impact on goals and creativity, there are other potential benefits of conflict:

- ◆ **Focusing of attention.** Conflicts help direct employees' attention to problems that need to be solved.
- ◆ **Stimulation of internal change.** Conflict can spur the organization to modify outdated or unproductive procedures.
- ◆ **Personal growth.** People involved in the conflict may learn new things—about work, about life, about relationships—that they can apply in the future. Their perspectives may be improved, their horizons widened.
- ◆ **Greater understanding of other employees.** Conflict may help people learn what others in the organization truly care about.
- ◆ **Excitement.** After all, wouldn't a job—and life in general—be boring without some conflict?
- ◆ **Greater energy and initiative.** Excited workers often become more productive.

If necessity is the mother of invention, conflict is its father.

— **KENNETH KAYE**

Author of Workplace Wars and How to End Them

One further benefit of conflict deserves mention. You've often heard of the problems caused by holding your feelings in. Strong negative emotions, especially, can fester if you suppress them. Conflict gives you a chance to vent those feelings—to clear the air.

Of course, if you want to make things better rather than worse, you have to vent your feelings in the right way. Calling someone a pigheaded jerk is not usually productive. You'll read more about venting emotions in Workshop 5.

? Did you know?

In studies of conflict in classrooms, psychologist David Johnson and educator Roger Johnson discovered that being part of a controversy helped students do the following:

- ◆ Generate more and better ideas
- ◆ Remember more correct information
- ◆ Improve the originality of their thinking
- ◆ Use more varied problem-solving strategies
- ◆ Find more novel and creative solutions
- ◆ Generalize what they learned to other situations

ACTIVITY 1.2

NAME _____

Assessing Your Own Approach to Conflict

Answer these questions as honestly as you can, using the following scale:

- 5 Very true of me
- 4 Often true of me
- 3 Occasionally true of me
- 2 Seldom true of me
- 1 Never true of me

- _____ 1. When people disagree with me, I have a hard time understanding why they are so illogical.
- _____ 2. I don't necessarily expect other people to agree with my position; I just want them to give my ideas their due weight.
- _____ 3. With some people, I take their disapproval as a sign that I must be right.
- _____ 4. In an argument, I try hard to understand the different points of view.
- _____ 5. When people argue with me, I have trouble expressing myself without getting angry.
- _____ 6. When I agree to a solution, I take responsibility for making it work and expect the others involved to do the same.
- _____ 7. In my type of work, I don't see a middle ground; what's right is right.
- _____ 8. In resolving a conflict, I try to find a solution that both my opponent and I can feel good about.
- _____ 9. I call a spade a spade, and a fool a fool.
- _____ 10. Once a conflict is over, my opponent and I get along fine with each other.

To discover your total score for this exercise, first reverse the scores for the odd-numbered items. That is, if you wrote a 5 next to the first item, make it a 1; if you wrote a 4, make it a 2. (A 3 stays the same.) Now add up all the numbers. The maximum score is 50. The closer you are to 50, the more likely you are to handle conflicts in a beneficial manner. Whatever your score, however, this workbook should help you improve your understanding of conflicts and the way you deal with them.

_____ **SCORE**

Constructive vs. Destructive Conflict

Beneficial conflicts are often called *constructive*, and harmful conflicts are said to be *destructive*. These terms help us focus on a basic difference: good conflicts *build up* the organization's strengths, while bad conflicts *tear things down*. But what conditions make a conflict constructive rather than destructive?

Most experts agree that a conflict is likely to be constructive if:

- ◆ The problem is seen as a mutual problem. In other words, neither party says, "I'm okay, *you're* the one with a problem."
- ◆ The parties pursue a "win-win" outcome, in which both parties gain, rather than a "win-lose" strategy in which one person has to lose in order for the other to win.

- ◆ Both people express their ideas openly and communicate effectively.
- ◆ Each person takes the other seriously and treats him or her with respect.
- ◆ Both people feel they have been understood and accepted.
- ◆ Both people feel they have influenced the outcome.
- ◆ Both people are committed to the agreement they finally reach.
- ◆ Relationships among the parties are strengthened by the process of finding a solution.

Turn each of those characteristics into its opposite and you have a portrait of destructive conflict that can rip an organization apart.

Is This Conflict Real?

Sometimes a conflict occurs for no genuine reason. Two people think they are opposed, and each feels the other is thwarting the accomplishment of an important goal. But in fact they've misunderstood each other. Their goals aren't as different as they suppose, and the conflict arose merely because of problems in perception.

Imagine, for instance, that Bob expects to be named the head of a new work team that is being formed. Instead, his supervisor, Jill, appoints someone else to lead the team. Jill actually has a more important and more prestigious role in mind for Bob, but Bob meanwhile is hurt and angry. Bob makes some sarcastic comments, which Jill thinks are out of line. Each becomes suspicious of the other, and soon they are in conflict. It was all caused by misperception and misunderstanding. What should they have done differently?

ACTIVITY 1.3

NAME _____

Checking Your Knowledge of Conflict

Are the following statements true or false? Mark the appropriate letter for each item.

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. For the good of the organization, employees and managers should try to avoid conflicts whenever possible. | T | F |
| 2. Conflict is about opposing or mutually incompatible goals. | T | F |
| 3. Conflict is always negative, hostile, and hurtful. | T | F |
| 4. Even if people are behaving normally—not yelling and screaming—there may be significant conflict going on. | T | F |
| 5. A loud argument is a clear sign of conflict. | T | F |
| 6. Dogmatic people are not likely to engage in conflict. | T | F |
| 7. Even if you're in the right, "winning" a conflict is not necessarily good for the organization. | T | F |
| 8. The right kind of conflict can make people more creative. | T | F |
| 9. Conflict can be helpful when it allows feelings to be vented. | T | F |
| 10. Conflicts always damage personal relationships. | T | F |

T F T F T F T F T F T F T F T F T F T F T F

“
Conflict itself is neither
good nor bad. . . .
What matters about conflict,
in the end, is how we
respond to it.

— **BRIAN MULDOON**

The Heart of Conflict

”



GETTING CONNECTED

For another self-assessment, try the Conflict Management Styles Assessment by the Blake Group.

<https://myqss.link/Conflict-Management-Styles>

WORKSHOP WRAP-UP

- Conflict occurs when one person's attempt to reach his or her goals interferes with another person's attempt to do the same.
- Conflict can damage an organization in many ways: for instance, by diverting energy from important goals, by increasing stress and frustration, and ultimately by poisoning morale and destroying job commitment.
- Conflict does have its good side. It often improves decision making, stimulates creativity, injects energy and excitement into an organization, and leads to personal growth and greater understanding among employees.
- Several conditions help make a conflict constructive rather than destructive: for instance, seeing the problem as a mutual one with a win-win outcome, expressing ideas openly and clearly, treating others with respect, and being committed to the agreed-upon solution.

Receiving Advice and Criticism

Workshop 2

At 8:15 a.m. in the hotel restaurant, half a dozen people who have finished breakfast are lining up to pay their bills. Most of them want to add the charge to their hotel tab, but Jack, the new man at the computerized cash register, is struggling with the system. It seems that, to assign a charge to a room, he has to go through three different computer screens, and this morning the hotel's network is running at turtle speed.



The people in line are fidgeting and muttering to each other. Jack would rather toss the bills in a pile and deal with them later, but Rosalee, the manager, specifically told him not to do that.

As Jack finishes with one customer and begins the long process over again with the next, a waiter named Hank glides up beside him.

“Didn’t Rosalee explain how to handle charges to the rooms?” Hank says in a low voice. “There’s a much quicker way. Here, I’ll show you.”

Gently nudging Jack away from the keyboard, Hank hits a certain combination of keys and the right screen pops up in two seconds. “See?” he murmurs to Jack. In a moment Hank completes the

transaction, and the grateful customer is out the door.

Hank explains the procedure once more, naming the keys as he points to them. “Okay, that will help you, won’t it?” Hank says, “Let me know if you

have any more problems.”

“Yeah, right,” Jack grumbles.

In front of all these restaurant patrons, Jack is embarrassed that he needed

instructions from a waiter. After all, he’s a manager in training! It’s actually Rosalee’s fault, he thinks, for not showing him the ropes.

With these thoughts dominating his mind, he tries to apply Hank’s shortcut but realizes he can’t. He was so angry and upset that he didn’t listen to what Hank told him.

What’s Inside

Here, you will learn to

- ◆ avoid becoming defensive when given advice or criticism
- ◆ understand the keys to good listening
- ◆ encourage useful feedback

Getting Defensive

Have you ever been in a situation like Jack's? That is, someone offers you unsolicited advice or criticism, which could be very helpful, but you get so annoyed that you can't really benefit from it?

For most of us, a reaction like Jack's is natural. We take pride in our work, our skills, our savvy, and when someone points out that we're not doing the job right—or merely that we might do it a little better—we feel we've been attacked. It's a blow to our self-esteem. We get defensive.

Depending on the situation and on our personalities, our defensiveness may lead us in a variety of different directions. For instance, we may:

- ◆ feel a surge of anger or embarrassment.
- ◆ strike back verbally at the person who's criticizing us.
- ◆ mentally withdraw from the whole affair, "tuning it out."

High self-esteem is generally considered a good thing: it's healthy to think well of yourself.

Unfortunately, according to psychologists, people with high self-esteem are the ones most likely to react negatively to advice. In other words, if you

Did you know?

Managers often say they give constructive criticism, but subordinates just as often say they don't receive any criticism that's constructive. What do you think is wrong here?

Defensive Reactions to Advice From Others



- ✓ I'm being judged—they think I'm no good.
- ✓ They're trying to put me down.
- ✓ They want to control me.
- ✓ What makes them think they're so superior?
- ✓ They want to make me look bad.
- ✓ It's their fault, not mine!

think you're highly competent, you're apt to resent any implication that you can't handle the situation on your own.

Even when the other person is clearly offering help rather than criticism, we may react in a defensive way. We may think the advice stems from disrespect. Or we may be annoyed that the person thought we "needed" help, even if he or she approached us in a friendly manner.

These defensive reactions often keep us from responding rationally. Not only do we fail to benefit from the other person's advice, but the situation may get worse—because now we're upset about what was said to us. Many a conflict begins in just this way.

ACTIVITY 2.1

NAME _____

How Do I Handle Advice and Criticism?

Rate the way you would handle each of the following situations. Use the following scale to describe your reactions:

- 4 Calm and rational
- 3 Annoyed, but willing to listen
- 2 Upset and hurt
- 1 Infuriated at the other person or at myself

- _____ 1. Your manager critiques a report you turn in and finds several items that need changing.
- _____ 2. A coworker criticizes you in front of others for a mistake you made.
- _____ 3. In a meeting you offer what you think is a good idea, but your supervisor dismisses it as “not relevant at this point.”
- _____ 4. Someone you supervise accuses you of playing favorites.
- _____ 5. As you are performing a task, a coworker steps up and offers to show you how to do it better.
- _____ 6. In a conversation with the boss, a coworker who is also your friend, presents an excellent argument—in the process, demolishing an argument that you just made.
- _____ 7. An ambitious newcomer has been bending the boss’s ear with suggestions. As a result, the boss tells you to change the procedures you normally follow.
- _____ 8. When you ask a subordinate to do something, he or she tells you it’s not a good idea, and explains why.
- _____ 9. You are a new employee, and an old hand offers in a rather patronizing way to “show you the ropes.”
- _____ 10. At an annual review, your boss briefly praises your work, announces a modest raise, and then describes five specific things you could do better.

Total your score. The highest possible score is 40, meaning that you would be absolutely calm and collected in all these provocative situations. Perhaps only a saint would score 40, but if your score is well below that, you can benefit from thinking about the times when criticism or help really sets you off. What emotions are being aroused? How do they prevent you from dealing rationally with the matter? How could you change?

_____ **SCORE**

Learning to Listen: Four Key Steps

When we respond defensively to help or criticism, our emotions have one immediate effect—they generally prevent us from really listening to what the other person is trying to tell us. If it's potentially good information, we lose the opportunity to benefit from it. Perhaps, too, we discourage that person from advising us in the future. Even worse, we increase our chances of misinterpreting the other

person's attitudes and motives, and this raises the potential for conflict.

How can we improve our ability to listen to messages that wound our self-esteem? The following four steps can help:



- Step 1:** *Put aside your ego as much as possible.* Separate your inner self from the criticism. If you receive criticism about a particular task, remind yourself that only that task is in question, not your overall performance—and certainly not your worth as a human being.
- Step 2:** *Suspend judgment about what you hear.* Don't decide immediately whether the other person is right or wrong. Don't jump to conclusions about the other person's motives and attitudes towards you.
- Step 3:** *Listen to the advice itself—the information contained in the message.* Concentrate fully on what the speaker is telling you. If you can't give the person your full attention, ask him or her if you can discuss the matter at a better time.
- Step 4:** *Take an active role in the conversation to make sure you've understood.* Paraphrase what the speaker has said and ask if your version is correct. Ask further questions to clarify any murky points. See the chart on the next page for a summary of active listening techniques.

Does Similarity Breed Resentment?

Jeffrey Fisher and Arie Nadler did research to identify conditions that produce negative reactions to assistance. One of their interesting findings is that negative reactions are stronger if the giver of help is "similar" to the recipient than if the giver is different. This could mean similarity in terms of status, age, gender, or almost any other relevant quality.

For example, help from a coworker who is about your age and has the same amount of experience is probably more threatening to you than help from a supervisor who is older and more experienced. That makes sense. You expect the supervisor to know more than you do, and it's no threat to your ego if she does.

Some Techniques for Active Listening

Technique	Description	Example
Attending	Focusing closely on the speaker.	Look directly at the person who is talking.
Paraphrasing	Repeating what the speaker has said in your own words, giving him or her an opportunity to correct you if you have misunderstood.	“You’re saying that I should have checked with Marketing, right?”
Summarizing	Offering an occasional summary of the main points made so far.	“Let’s see, you’ve said that there are three things I ought to consider . . .”
Interpretation checking	Stating your interpretation of what the speaker is conveying—both ideas and feelings—and asking if you’re correct.	“It seems to me you’re saying I made a serious mistake and you’re pretty upset about it. Is that right?”
Using clarifying questions	Asking questions that attempt to make a point clearer or more explicit.	“I’m not sure what you mean by ‘checking with Marketing.’ Which people in Marketing should I have talked to?”
Using probing questions	Asking questions that encourage the other person to expand or elaborate on what was said.	“Okay, I’m getting the general idea, but can you go deeper into that?”

ACTIVITY 2.2

NAME _____

Listening Without Defensiveness

“You know,” your colleague says to you, “we’ve worked as a team for six months now, and I like you as a person, but I really feel that you never listen to me. It seems like, whenever I offer ideas, you tune me out.” What techniques could you use in this situation to demonstrate that you are indeed a good listener?

1. *Ask for specific examples.*

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

10. _____

“
Our success—in the
workplace and in life—is directly
correlated with our ability to hear
criticism. That is how we learn.
”

— **HENDRIE WEISINGER**

Psychologist

Encouraging Feedback

The four key steps discussed in the preceding section will give you a good start on responding well to advice and criticism. However, you can do more than listen well— you can actually encourage people to come to you with useful feedback.

If your boss and your coworkers feel you are not approachable, they are likely to hold back with their advice until they believe you've gone so far wrong that somebody has to set you straight. By this point the seeds of a conflict are already germinating.

Wouldn't you rather that people spoke to you earlier and let you know what was on their minds?

Here are some ways you can encourage polite and effective feedback from others:

- ◆ Be approachable; let others know that you will listen if they have good advice for you.
 - ◆ Convey your attentiveness with eye contact.
 - ◆ Use positive body language. For instance, keep your posture relaxed; don't cross your arms or fidget.
- ◆ Don't make excuses or blame others; those reactions merely sound defensive.
 - ◆ Thank the person for his or her help. Even a nasty critic will be disarmed if you seem genuinely grateful!
 - ◆ If appropriate, ask for further suggestions.
 - ◆ If you do adopt someone's advice, tell him or her that you have done so. Even if you don't follow the suggestions, let the person know that you considered them seriously.

Once you begin encouraging helpful comments rather than reacting defensively, you may find that something amazing occurs. Besides opening yourself to new and useful information, you may discover that your relationships with others dramatically improve. People who used to be reluctant to approach you may become your friends. After all, by lending an attentive ear to their advice, you make them feel useful and appreciated.



ACTIVITY 2.3

NAME _____

The Agitated Supervisor

Imagine this scenario: You work for a company that provides computer support services. Last week you and a fellow technician upgraded the network in a major client's office, installing new hardware and software. In your opinion, your coworker tends to be a little sloppy, but you personally checked the entire system before you left, and it worked perfectly.

The client seemed happy at the time. This morning, though, the department secretary tells you that the client called up and complained to your supervisor about the network's performance. You can tell the boss is upset, though nothing has been said to you yet. How would you handle this situation?



GETTING CONNECTED

For further ideas about improving your listening skills,
<https://myqss.link/Listening-Skills-Quiz>

WORKSHOP WRAP-UP

- Defensiveness often prevents us from responding well to advice or criticism—or even truly listening to what the other person is trying to tell us.
- We can improve our listening by setting aside our egos, suspending judgment, listening carefully to the information in the message, and using active listening techniques to make sure we've understood.
- By becoming approachable, attentive, and grateful listeners, we can encourage people to come to us with good advice.

NOTES:

Giving Advice and Criticism

Workshop 3

Jana has worked in a busy drugstore for almost five years, and the owner has told her she's in line to become assistant manager. She's dedicated and smart. That's why it pains her to see the new pharmacist, Raisa, making such a hash of things.

Raisa has no sense of how to prioritize her work. This morning when she arrived, twelve minutes late, there was a stack of prescription slips waiting to be filled.

Some were brought in by customers; others were phoned in by doctors. Did Raisa check to see which were most urgent? No. Looking nervous about the amount of work she had to do, she started filling the prescriptions in seemingly random order.

Now Jana notices a long-time customer, Mr. Gretzky, looking dismayed, but waiting patiently. At this point Jana feels she has to intervene.

"Do you have a script for Gretzky?" she asks Raisa.

"Who?"

"Mr. Gretzky—he's over there waiting. It's probably for his heart pills. You know, it's hard for him to stand around a long time, so you should work on his prescription right away."

"Oh, nobody told me," Raisa says quickly.

"You can see him standing there," Jana points out. "And all the scripts are marked—pickup, delivery, or whether the customer's in the store. Besides, if you'd get here on time, you wouldn't fall behind."

Raisa glares as she yanks a slip from the pile. "There!" she says.

"Gretzky—it's for an antifungal agent, not heart medicine. You know, I *am* a licensed pharmacist!"

"Well," Jana snaps back, "if Mr. Gretzky has a heart attack in the store, it will be your fault!"

Storming off, Jana thinks, "I'm just trying to help people, and see what I get for it!"



What's Inside

Here, you will learn to

- ◆ frame advice and criticism constructively
- ◆ address a coworker's personal behavior
- ◆ use "I" messages to avoid blaming
- ◆ framing advice and criticism

Constructive vs. Destructive Comments

What caused the blow-up between Jana and Raisa?

Certainly, Raisa could have shown more willingness to listen to advice. Using techniques like the ones you learned in Workshop 2, Raisa could have tried to avoid getting defensive and to focus instead on the usefulness of what she was hearing.

Still, doesn't Jana bear some responsibility for the conflict? Didn't she help provoke Raisa's negative reaction?



After all, Jana implied that Raisa was neglecting the customers, then suggested that she couldn't remember procedure. To top it off, Jana threw in criticism about Raisa's being late for work. No wonder Raisa became irritated and defensive! Even though Jana's intentions were good, her remarks were not at all tactful.

Workshop 1 introduced the terms *constructive* and *destructive* in relation to conflict. They apply just as well to advice. To help people hear you without undue defensiveness, you need to frame your advice in a way that allows them to preserve their self-esteem. Instead of challenging their opinion of themselves as good employees and decent people, try to reinforce it. That's what is meant by constructive advice.

Here are some qualities of constructive advice:

- ◆ **Nonjudgmental.** Constructive advice doesn't convey judgment of the other person. It doesn't say or imply that "you're wrong," "you're stupid," or the like.
- ◆ **Focused on the issue, not on the person.** Constructive advice concentrates on the difficulty at hand, not on the qualities of the person you're advising.
- ◆ **Framed as a mutual problem.** Constructive advice frames the issue as a mutual problem to be solved, not as a problem that the other person must solve alone.



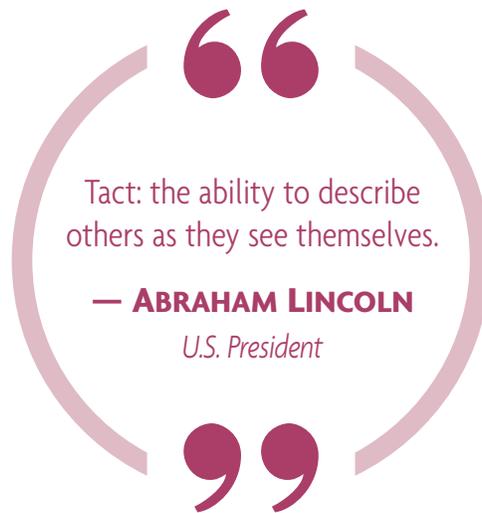
◆ **Balanced.** Constructive advice balances the positive and the negative. For instance: “I can see you’re working really hard and things are going well overall, but there’s one small thing we ought to look at.” Usually, in fact, you should state the positive before you get to the negative, and perhaps reinforce the positive at the end of the conversation as well.

◆ **Focused on the present.**

Constructive advice deals with today’s problem; it doesn’t dredge up matters from the past.

◆ **Empathic.** The word *empathy* refers to the ability to share the feelings of another person. Constructive advice is empathic in the sense that it shows you care about how the other person is feeling.

◆ **Open to discussion.** In constructive advice or criticism, the speaker conveys the sense that the listener may have a different—and possibly valid—perspective on the situation.



Watch Your Language!

Often you may *think* you’re being constructive when the words you choose imply the opposite. Look at the following common expressions and try to decide what’s wrong with them:

1. I can’t see why you . . .
2. If you look at this carefully, you’ll see that . . .
3. I realize you can’t be expected to . . .
4. You failed to specify . . .
5. I know you’re trying, but . . .
6. Most people here understand that . . .

Do those phrases sound innocent? This is what the listener might hear:

1. You’re so stupid that what you did is beyond comprehension.
2. You didn’t do careful work.
3. It’s not your fault you’re unqualified—you should never have been given this job.
4. You were negligent.
5. No matter how hard you try, you can’t make up for your lack of talent.
6. You’re dumber than most other people in the organization.

ACTIVITY 3.1

NAME _____

Framing Criticism

The following comments are examples of negative, destructive criticism. In the space provided, reframe each item to make it more constructive.

1. "You're always late. Why can't you get to work on time?"
2. "If you weren't always so hyper, you'd see we can't rush this job. There's too much at stake."
3. "We did it your way last time, and everybody said the result was a disaster. Stop trying to run everything."
4. "Why didn't you wait for help from somebody who knew how to do this right?"
5. "I don't understand why you ever thought this plan would work."
6. "The boss ripped this proposal apart, pointing out lots of mistakes you made, so you're going to have to do it all over."

Dealing with Personal Behavior

It's all very well, you may be thinking, to say that advice should be nonjudgmental and should focus on the issue rather than the person. But what if the issue *is* the person?

Say you have a coworker, Robert, who is always ill-tempered, loud-mouthed, and at times abusive. What you want to say to Robert is that, since nothing positive ever comes out of his mouth, he should staple it shut. That wouldn't, however, be a constructive remark. So what can you do about the situation?

First, of course, you can simply try to avoid Robert whenever possible. If you don't have to work with him, just stay away.

Second, if you do have to work with Robert, you should remind

yourself that he may have some reason for his ill temper. Perhaps he has a terrible home life. Perhaps his parents died when he was young and he's been insecure ever since. You don't need to invent excuses for him, but empathy requires that you try to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Third, understand that you're not actually objecting to Robert as a person. You may hardly know Robert as a person. What bothers you—what you want to change—is his *behavior*, the way he acts around you and your coworkers.

Finally, if you do decide to offer Robert some well-intentioned advice, you can focus on specific suggestions that would make the environment better for everyone, including him. That is, you can try to show him how *he* would benefit from changing his behavior.



Be Constructive: It's Your Responsibility!

Just as you have a responsibility for becoming a good listener, so, too, you are responsible for conveying advice and criticism in a way that helps other people benefit from it. This is especially true if you're a supervisor, but it is also true for your interactions with your peers.

ACTIVITY 3.2

NAME _____

Advising a Grouch

Assume you are beginning a team project in which Robert, notorious for his uncooperativeness and ill temper, has to play a major role. Think about how you might approach Robert to advise him to behave cooperatively during the project. How could you begin? What points could you make? Write some of the things you might say to Robert.

“

People ask you for criticism,
but they only want praise.

— **WILLIAM SOMERSET
MAUGHAM**

*British playwright, novelist
and short story writer*

”

Using “I” Messages

One verbal technique that can help you frame advice constructively is the use of “I” messages.

What is an “I” message? It’s one that avoids directly accusing the other person by making clear that the reactions you’re stating are your own.

Generally you can accomplish this by using first-person singular pronouns: “I,” “me,” “myself,” and so on. The opposite of an “I” message is a “you” message, one that assigns the blame or responsibility to someone else.



Look at the examples below. Can you see why “you” messages tend to make the listener feel defensive? An “I” message helps avoid directing so much blame at the other person. Also, with an “I” message, you can get your own feelings out in the open, helping the listener comprehend your motivation. This improves mutual understanding

and increases the chance that the listener will take your comments to heart.

Here Are Some Examples of “I” and “You” Messages:

“I” Message

I was upset when you arrived late for the meeting. I felt like you didn’t care about the project.

In my opinion, this plan has some flaws in it.

I don’t understand why nothing was done. I thought we had agreed on what to do.

“You” Message

You showed you didn’t care about the project by not bothering to come to the meeting on time.

Your plan is flawed.

You dropped the ball. You didn’t follow through on the agreement we made.

ACTIVITY 3.3

NAME _____

Identifying “I” Messages

For each of the following comments, mark “Y” if it is an “I” message and “N” if it is not. Remember, a true “I” message takes responsibility for the ideas or emotions being expressed and avoids blaming or putting down the other person.

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| 1. You don't know what you're doing here, do you? | Y | N |
| 2. Let me do that—I know a better way. | Y | N |
| 3. Personally, I'm worried about some of the consequences of this plan. | Y | N |
| 4. I think you should be fired! | Y | N |
| 5. To me, it seems there might be a better alternative. | Y | N |
| 6. I'm not sure I understand the reasoning behind your proposal. | Y | N |
| 7. Let me guess: You messed up because you were totally lost. | Y | N |
| 8. After recommending you for the job, I felt let down when it seemed like you weren't giving it your best effort. | Y | N |
| 9. Can you help me get a handle on this? I'm having trouble seeing what went wrong. | Y | N |
| 10. I'm just fed up with your stupid behavior. | Y | N |

1 N, 2 N, 3 Y, 4 N, 5 Y, 6 Y, 7 N, 8 Y, 9 Y, 10 N

Is Humor Advisable?

Some people are adept at presenting their criticism with a dose of humor. With a joke or a teasing remark, they can make their point gently without arousing the listener's defenses: “Hey, Mark, I thought I was supposed to be the one with all the goofy ideas around here. Are you trying to horn in on my territory?”

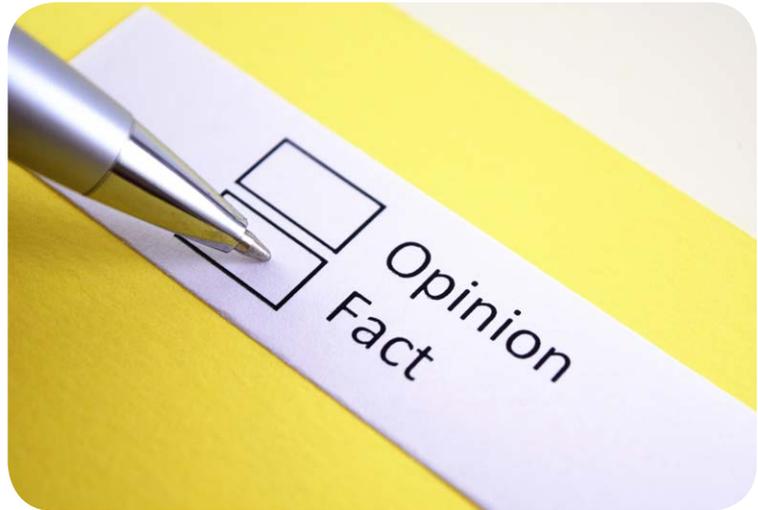
If you're good at light humor, you can often use it to your advantage. If you're not so good, or if the situation is tense, you're probably better off avoiding attempts at humor, because a lame joke can be taken the wrong way.

Preparing to Get It Right: Facts, Time, Place

In addition to the way you frame your advice or criticism, some other important factors help determine whether it will be effective:

1. **Accuracy.** Before you criticize or advise someone, make sure you have the facts exactly right. Know what you're talking about. Even if you're sure your general approach is correct, a mistaken detail can make you seem ignorant.
2. **Clarity and specificity.** Deliver your information clearly, and be specific. Don't leave the other person guessing about your meaning. Not only is vagueness not helpful, but it can leave the other person feeling criticized for no good reason.
3. **Time and place.** Your choice of time and place has a crucial impact on the effectiveness of your comments. If you are discussing a particular event, you should speak up soon enough after the event so that it is fresh in the person's mind. Yet you also want to choose a time when the person is calm, not too busy to listen to you,

and free of distractions. You want a quiet place, if possible, where you won't be interrupted. In most cases you want to be alone with the person you're advising so that you don't embarrass him or her in front of others.



How can you make sure your comments are accurate, clear, and delivered at the right time and place? The answer is that you should prepare well in advance. Gather all the information you can about the situation and its causes. Think carefully about how to phrase your remarks. Then plan the best time and place to talk with the other person.

It is much easier to be
critical than to be correct.

— BENJAMIN DISRAELI

British Statesman

ACTIVITY 3.4

NAME _____

My Style of Criticizing

This activity will help you understand how often you apply the techniques you've learned so far in this workshop. Answer these questions as honestly as you can, using the following scale:

- 5 Always
- 4 Often
- 3 Occasionally
- 2 Seldom
- 1 Never

- _____ 1. When criticizing someone, I try not to say negative things about him or her personally.
- _____ 2. When I offer criticism, I consider it a learning experience—for me as well as for the other person.
- _____ 3. If I'm upset about people's performance, I make clear that they're to blame for the problem.
- _____ 4. I don't plan my critiques in advance; I just let it fly.
- _____ 5. People claim they don't understand why I'm criticizing them.
- _____ 6. When I state a critique, I show that I'm willing to accept that I might be wrong.
- _____ 7. After criticizing someone, I find out later that there was more to the story than I thought.
- _____ 8. I'm careful to choose the right moment to give someone advice or criticism.
- _____ 9. If I need to criticize one individual, I say it in front of everybody.
- _____ 10. Even with the most obnoxious people at work, I manage to state my criticisms positively.

To calculate your total score for this exercise, first reverse the scores for items 3, 4, 5, 7, and 9. That is, if you wrote a 5 next to one of those items, make it a 1; if you wrote a 4, make it a 2. (A 3 stays the same.) Now add up all the numbers.

The higher your score, the more likely you are to offer advice and criticism in an effective manner. The maximum score is 50. How close did you come? In what areas do you need to work the hardest to improve your ability to give advice and criticism?

_____ **SCORE**



GETTING CONNECTED

Go to a Web bookstore and look for business books about the art of providing criticism and feedback. For example, at Barnes & Noble—

<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/>

—you can search for *feedback books*. How many current book titles do you find on the subject? Why do you think it's such a popular topic?

WORKSHOP WRAP-UP

- To help people hear you without undue defensiveness, frame your advice in a way that allows them to preserve their self-esteem.
- Even when you object to someone's personal behavior, you should focus your comments on specific behavioral changes that might improve the environment for everyone.
- “I” messages, which avoid accusations and show that the reactions you're stating are your own, can help you frame advice constructively.
- Before offering advice or criticism, you should prepare in advance so that your remarks are accurate, clear, and delivered at the best time and place.

“

I like criticism.
It makes you strong.

— **LEBRON JAMES**

Basketball Star

”

NOTES:

Aggressiveness vs. Assertiveness

Workshop 4

Louis sits down at the union meeting, eager to discuss a problem he and the other airline ticket agents have had. Since a change in flight schedules took effect, the agents have been overwhelmed with long lines of people checking in. The passengers have been getting upset, and the agents—Louis included—have grown frazzled and dissatisfied.

Drummond, the union representative, begins with routine matters. Louis gestures for attention, but Drummond calls on Juan instead.

“Lately,” says Juan, “we’ve been having some trouble handling the workload. The lines are getting too long. We’re issuing tickets and checking baggage as fast as we can, but the passengers are upset about it.”

“What’s the problem?” Drummond asks. “The number of passengers hasn’t increased, so why can’t you keep up?”

Now Louis chimes in. “If you’d pay more attention to what’s going on here, you’d know. The new schedules have more flights clumped together around one o’clock and three o’clock, so there are more passengers at those times.”

Drummond stiffens. “As your union representative, I do pay attention.”

“Look, Mr. Drummond,” says Juan, “we don’t mean to criticize

you. We’re just saying the work conditions have changed, and we’re unhappy about it. We feel that, as our representative, you could speak to management.”

“Tell those idiots they need to do something,” Louis adds.

Drummond frowns and mutters, “Management doesn’t respond well to griping.”

Louis sneers, “Whose side are you on?”

Juan hastens to explain, “Mr. Drummond, it’s in management’s interests to keep travelers happy. If a supervisor could help out

behind the counter at the busy times, it’d make a big difference for the passengers.”

“All right,” Drummond concedes. “I’ll see what I can do.”



What’s Inside

Here, you will learn to:

- ◆ distinguish between aggressive and assertive behavior
- ◆ develop the characteristics of assertiveness
- ◆ perceive aggressiveness in others

Assertive or Aggressive: What's the Difference?

In the scenario you've just read, Louis and Juan wanted to make the same point about their working conditions. Juan managed to get the point across effectively. Louis, however, succeeded only in irritating the union representative. Can you tell why Juan was so much more successful than Louis?

Defining the Terms

In our scenario, Louis's remarks were *aggressive*. That is, in conveying his own views and feelings, Louis said things that he knew might wound Drummond. He challenged the man's self-esteem by implying that Drummond was neglectful, foolish, and disloyal to his union members. Louis's tone was hostile and sneering. Not surprisingly, Drummond's reaction was negative.

What are the alternatives to aggressiveness? Being passive is one obvious alternative. Louis could have chosen not to speak up at all. In that case, however, he would have lost the opportunity to help himself and his coworkers resolve a significant problem. He would have forfeited his right to have a say in his own working conditions.

Juan's approach represents a better alternative. Juan's contributions were *assertive* rather than aggressive or passive. That is, Juan put forth his own ideas, expressed his feelings, and by implication conveyed his right to be taken seriously. Yet at the same time he showed respect for the rights and feelings of others, including Drummond.

Aggressiveness Without Words



In addition to our words, our nonverbal behaviors—gestures, postures, expressions, and tones—convey whether we are being aggressive, assertive, or passive. Aggressive people, for example, often do the following:

- ✓ Clench their fists.
- ✓ Point their fingers at others.
- ✓ Stand with hands on hips and feet apart.
- ✓ Narrow their eyes.
- ✓ Keep their mouths tight and eyes fixed, showing little expression.
- ✓ Raise their voices.

What nonverbal behaviors do you think would show assertiveness instead of aggressiveness? Read on in this workshop to find out.

Aggression as a Learned Response

Aggressiveness often appears when people feel they are being threatened in some way. For instance, if someone insults you, you may well respond with a similarly barbed remark—meeting aggression with aggression.

It may seem “natural” to use aggression for self-defense. Actually, though, psychologists disagree about whether aggressiveness is an innate characteristic of all humans. The experts also have different opinions about whether a tendency toward aggressiveness can be inherited from one’s parents.

Psychologists do agree, however, that specific patterns of aggressive behavior are not inherited. Rather, these patterns are learned. A man who reacts to criticism by shoving his critic in the chest probably learned that response in childhood—and never grew out of it. A woman known for sarcastic remarks in meetings may have learned early in life to protect herself with scornful words.

As these examples show, the behaviors we learn early in life are often not the best ones. But we can modify them. We can learn to defend our rights by asserting ourselves rather than by being aggressive.



? Did you know?

Workplace violence—an ultimate expression of aggression—is a growing concern. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics:

- ◆ Homicide is the third leading cause of death on the job. Among women, it is the *number one* cause of workplace death.
- ◆ Eighty-five percent of homicides are men and 15% are women.
- ◆ Overall, 18% of violent crimes are committed while a person is on work duty.

Much of the violence stems from interactions with the public (for instance, holdups at convenience stores) rather than from conflicts between coworkers. Still, in the wake of horrific news reports, there is more and more worry about disgruntled employees erupting into violence.

ACTIVITY 4.1

NAME _____

How Aggressive Am I?

Answer these questions as honestly as you can, using the following scale:

- 5 Very true of me
- 4 Often true of me
- 3 Occasionally true of me
- 2 Seldom true of me
- 1 Never true of me

- _____ 1. If people's ideas are stupid, I tell them so.
- _____ 2. When I disagree with people, I try to keep in mind that they have a right to disagree with me.
- _____ 3. No matter how much I dislike people, I try not to insult them.
- _____ 4. When people challenge me, I get sarcastic.
- _____ 5. If I need to attack someone personally to defend my rights, I'll do so.
- _____ 6. I try to respect a coworker's opinions, even if he or she has never been right in the past.
- _____ 7. When arguing for something I believe is right, I let the chips fall where they may.
- _____ 8. If a coworker says something really silly, I laugh in his or her face.
- _____ 9. If an argument gets personal and nasty, I try to stay out of it.
- _____ 10. I avoid using language that could undercut other people's images of themselves.
- _____ 11. I speak up fast when someone seems about to insult me.
- _____ 12. Knowing when to stay silent is a characteristic I admire.
- _____ 13. I'm always waiting for coworkers to mess up, so I can straighten them out.
- _____ 14. I'm known for giving everyone an opportunity to voice an opinion.

To calculate your total score for this exercise, first reverse the scores for items 2, 3, 6, 9, 10, 12, and 14. That is, if you wrote a 5 next to one of those items, make it a 1; if you wrote a 4, make it a 2. (A 3 stays the same.) Now add up all the numbers. The maximum score is 70. The higher your score, the more aggressive you tend to be. How do you think you might reduce your aggressiveness and learn to be assertive instead?

_____ **SCORE**

Characteristics of Assertive Behavior

Now that you understand what it means to be assertive rather than aggressive, how do you think assertive people normally express themselves? They do speak up; they are definitely not passive. But somehow they assert their opinions and their rights without causing offense.

Here are some specific techniques used by assertive people:

- ◆ Direct eye contact
- ◆ Posture that is firm and straight but not stiff
- ◆ Serious but not severe facial expressions
- ◆ Gestures that reinforce the message without threatening
- ◆ Objective (not judgmental) language
- ◆ Short, to-the-point sentences
- ◆ Honest statements of feelings and desires
- ◆ Frequent use of “I” messages (see Workshop 3)
- ◆ Voice that is steady and strong without being loud
- ◆ Willingness to listen to other people

How do you think interactions in your workplace would change if everyone were assertive rather than either aggressive or passive?



Do You Have a “Script” for Aggression?

Some psychologists believe that each of us creates a mental “script” for aggression. Like a movie script, it tells us what to say and do in provocative situations. We have learned it over the years—in effect, we have it memorized. And, all too often, as soon as the triggering circumstances pop up, we follow the script blindly, playing out our aggression even if the consequences are likely to be bad.

Luckily, because the script is learned, we can unlearn it if we make the effort. The first step is simple:

STOP AND THINK!

“
If you want to influence people, you will be welcomed much more if you have a gentle approach than if you are aggressive.”

— **RUTH BADER GINSBERG**
U.S. Supreme Court Justice

ACTIVITY 4.2

NAME _____

Practice Your Assertiveness

Imagine the following situation: Your team is working on a big project. The outcome will be important both for the company and for the team members, who stand to earn a lot of personal credit if the project succeeds. At the start of the work, you had what you knew was an excellent plan. But the team chose another direction, mostly because the team leader, Bruce, insisted on his own opinion while discounting yours. Now the team's in trouble, and you think you must come to the rescue by putting your own plan forward once again. At a team meeting, various people are sitting around, complaining about the lack of progress, though Bruce insists everything is okay. You clear your throat and begin to speak.

In the space below, sketch out what you will say. Include notes about your tone of voice, your gestures, and so on.

Perceiving Aggressiveness in Others

Earlier in this workshop, you learned that aggressiveness is often used as a defensive measure. If you think that someone has insulted you, for instance, you may tend to react aggressively.

But this raises the question of what we *perceive* as aggressive behavior. What if the other person had no idea that he or she was insulting you? Perhaps the other person didn't know you were sensitive on that particular matter. Or perhaps the other person was just a little thoughtless.

To avoid such misunderstandings, we need to be careful about interpreting other people's words and behavior. This is particularly true when differences of gender or culture are involved.

Gender Differences

In our culture, men tend to use both aggressive and assertive language more often than women do. This is part of the way our culture defines appropriate sex roles. When ordering lunch, a typical man might say, "Give me a hamburger, rare," while a woman might say, "I'd like a hamburger, and can you make it rare, please?" In a disagreement a man might say, "You're wrong," while a woman might say, "I think you're making a mistake in this case."

Of course there are many variations from these stereotypes. Yet the fact that we expect a certain style of language from men and a somewhat different style from women can lead us into misinterpretations.

Imagine that you're assigned to a work team with a new person you've never met before. In the opening discussion, you express an opinion, and the

newcomer contradicts you by saying, "No, that's wrong, it'll never work." If the newcomer is a man, you may accept that language as simply a brusque way of speaking. If those words are uttered by a woman, however, you may think she's overly aggressive and hostile—in which case, you're likely to respond defensively.



Cultural Differences

Different cultures tolerate different amounts of verbal aggressiveness and assertiveness.

For the most part, American culture values assertiveness. When we see someone politely but forcefully standing up for his or her opinion, we are likely to applaud. In fact, because our culture has so much respect for rugged individualism, we often tolerate some outright aggression if we think it's in a good cause.

In contrast, many East Asian cultures place much more value on cooperation and group spirit than on individualism. Consequently, they discourage the use of language that is confrontational. A recent immigrant from Japan may feel hurt by language you intended simply as direct and blunt.

Similar cultural variation occurs in feelings about personal space. In the United States, social distance—the amount

of space we consider comfortable for business meetings and impersonal social events—ranges from about 4 feet to about 12 feet. If someone consistently comes closer than that, he or she is entering our personal space, an area we prefer to reserve for friends, loved ones, and relatives. In most Asian cultures, however, people tend to give each other a greater amount of room, while in many Middle Eastern and Latin cultures the reverse is true. Thus, if someone from a “close-up” culture moves closer to argue a point with someone from a relatively “stand-offish” culture, the behavior may be interpreted as aggressive even if the words are merely assertive.

The main point is this: Whatever your gender or cultural background, you should pause before

interpreting someone's behavior as aggressive. Take a deep breath. Think it over. Squelch those defensive reactions unless they're truly needed.

Did you know?

Research suggests the following differences between male and female communication in the United States:

Men

More challenging
More direct
More authoritative
More competitive
More controlling

Women

More accommodating
More deferential
More collaborative
More cooperative
More supportive

Whether these qualities are actually typical of men and women is less important than the fact that we often assume them to be. Thus someone who behaves in a different way—a way that defies the stereotype—may often be misinterpreted.



GETTING CONNECTED

Many people become aggressive at times because they don't really know how to be assertive. Do you ever have trouble asserting yourself, or do you know others who do? For a measure of your assertiveness, try the test at:

<https://myqss.link/Assertiveness-Test>

Ask only for the free summary.

WORKSHOP WRAP-UP

- Aggressive behavior promotes one's own opinions, feelings, or rights at the expense of other people's.
- Assertive people use techniques such as making direct eye contact, speaking in a strong (but not loud) voice, and stating their feelings honestly.
- Often we misinterpret the extent of another person's aggressiveness, especially when gender or cultural differences are involved.

Yolanda is a patient individual, but Toshi really gets on her nerves. The two of them work in a printing plant, handling high-speed presses. When Yolanda and Toshi have to collaborate on a job, Toshi is often gruff, as if he'd rather be working with



someone else. Although Toshi is older and more experienced, Yolanda knows she's good at the work.

Two days ago, they were printing a brochure for a very fussy client. When Yolanda tried to discuss the client's likes and dislikes from a previous job, Toshi ignored her and set up the press in his own way. After 500 copies were done, their supervisor rejected the entire run, criticizing them both. Yolanda bit her tongue and said nothing. That night she was so upset she couldn't sleep.

This morning, again forced to work with Toshi, she insisted on reading the specifications out loud before they started. He tapped his fingers impatiently and scowled. Again she stifled her anger.

This afternoon, in a meeting that the supervisor calls once a month to review the work, Toshi pipes up. "It'd be a lot easier," he says, "if those of us who know the job didn't have to work with less experienced people."

This, finally, is too much for Yolanda. She lashes out at Toshi in front of everybody, accusing him of being rude, sloppy, and ignorant. The supervisor stares at her, aghast, and the other employees look at their hands. When Yolanda finishes, the supervisor asks to talk with her privately.

After the meeting, though she believes she was right to be mad, Yolanda feels embarrassed, wondering if she could have handled the situation in a better way.

What's Inside

Here, you will learn to

- ◆ understand the origin of anger
- ◆ identify who is responsible for your anger
- ◆ recognize how you express anger
- ◆ use seven steps to manage anger

The Nature of Anger

Yolanda's final insight was correct: she could have found a better method of handling her problem with Toshi. By blowing up at him in front of everyone else, she probably created a lot of ill feeling, and she didn't help resolve the underlying difficulties.

To understand the implications of Yolanda's predicament, we need to begin by looking at how and why anger arises.

The Origin of Anger

We all get angry at various times, both at work and in our personal lives. But anger isn't our first response, no matter how much we are provoked. In fact, it is what psychologists call a *secondary emotion*. That is, it stems from some other emotion.

If someone insults you, for instance, you'll first feel some psychological pain. Your self-esteem may be wounded. If the put-down occurred in public, you may feel shame. You may also be afraid that others will believe what the insulting person said. These primary emotions then lead you to get angry.

Numerous feelings can arouse anger. Here are just a few of them:

- ◆ Embarrassment
- ◆ Shame
- ◆ Humiliation
- ◆ Guilt
- ◆ Disappointment
- ◆ Frustration
- ◆ Fear
- ◆ Jealousy
- ◆ Resentment
- ◆ Grief

To put it simply, anger is a response that helps you cope with being vulnerable. Like aggressiveness (discussed in Workshop 4), it is usually defensive in origin, even though it can put you on the offensive against others.

Terms for Anger

In describing anger, we often use colorful, metaphorical language, including words like these:

- ✓ fit to be tied
- ✓ exploding
- ✓ flying off the handle
- ✓ like a raging bull
- ✓ at the end of one's rope
- ✓ rabid
- ✓ fuming
- ✓ on a rampage
- ✓ boiling
- ✓ foaming at the mouth
- ✓ blowing up
- ✓ out of one's mind

Can you think of other such terms? What do they tell you about the nature of anger?

Consequences of Anger

Anger can have many negative results. You know, of course, the severest consequences— some people become violent when they're angry, resorting to fists, knives, or guns.

For most of us, however, anger takes the form of words, looks, and gestures, or at most a contemptuous shove. These responses don't hurt anyone in a physical sense, but they can nevertheless have bad effects. Think of the times when your anger at a friend or loved one has disrupted your relationship for days, weeks, or longer.

In a work environment, uncontrolled anger is likely to produce consequences like these:

- ◆ The angry person says unwise things or makes exaggerated accusations.
- ◆ Other people get angry as well.
- ◆ Additional grievances are aired, complicating the situation.
- ◆ Relationships are strained or broken.
- ◆ Morale and team spirit are undermined.
- ◆ The underlying conflict—the source of the original problem— becomes even harder to resolve.

In addition, there are often internal consequences for the angry person. Anger is bad for the health! It has been known to cause the following problems, among many others:

- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| ◆ Increased stress | ◆ High blood pressure |
| ◆ Anxiety | ◆ Heart disease |
| ◆ Headaches | ◆ Stroke |
| ◆ Upset stomach | ◆ Insomnia |
| ◆ Ulcers | |

All in all, anger usually isn't a grand experience.

Did you know?

A study conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health showed a link between anger and heart disease.

The researchers followed 1,300 men with an average age of 62 for a period of seven years. The men with the highest levels of anger (as measured by a personality test) were *three times more likely* to develop heart disease than the men with the lowest levels of anger.

ACTIVITY 5.1

NAME _____

Analyzing an Episode of Anger

Think back to a recent time when you became seriously angry. Try to remember the details, and then answer the following questions.

1. What circumstance (for instance, what behavior by another person) started the feelings that led to your anger?

2. What were your initial feelings that prompted the anger? In other words, what feelings came before the anger?

3. What were the consequences of your anger?

For others:

For yourself:

The Responsibility for Anger

Perhaps the biggest step you can take in handling your anger is to realize who is responsible for it. After reading about the nature and origin of anger, can you guess where the responsibility lies?

The answer is simple: *You are responsible for your own anger.*

“Wait a minute!” you may object. “I don’t get angry for no reason. When I’m angry, I have a good excuse for it.”

That’s true. And it’s true of most other people as well. Often anger is “justified” in the sense that we have legitimate reasons for it. That doesn’t change the fact that the angry person is the one responsible for the emotion.



Think of it this way: Often you may say something like “Nina made me really angry today.” Yet it wasn’t Nina who actually *made* the anger. You made it yourself, most likely to defend yourself from something Nina said or did. However offensive Nina may have been, nobody ordered you to get angry at her.

If you’re angry, the anger exists inside you. It’s yours, nobody else’s. Therefore you are the only one who can manage it properly.

What’s the Use of Anger?



On some occasions when you’re mad, a friend or colleague may say to you, “What’s the use of getting upset?” Often, as this question implies, anger is counterproductive. But it’s important to realize that anger also has its uses. As a defensive response, it can help us adapt to a situation in a number of ways.

For instance:

- ✓ Anger charges us with energy and helps us act forcefully.
- ✓ It focuses our attention.
- ✓ It can lead us to bring negative feelings into the open.
- ✓ If we express anger, it signals others that we mean business.

ACTIVITY 5.2

NAME _____

Accepting Responsibility

Go back to the episode of anger you described in Activity 5.1. Think about how your feelings and the outcome might have changed if you had clearly decided, as soon as your anger flared up, that it was your responsibility. Explain the potential differences in the space below.

To Let It Out or Keep It In

When you think about managing anger, it may seem there are two basic alternatives: let it out or keep it in. In other words, you can either express your anger or suppress it. Unfortunately, as you've seen earlier in this workshop, both of these options can have negative consequences if carried to an extreme.

On one hand, if you let your anger burst out, you may provoke other people to get angry, strain your relationships with them, and undercut any chance of working with them as a team. Such an outburst may not even relieve your anger. It can help you

temporarily blow off steam, but the anger itself can remain and even deepen as a result of the hostile words you've used.

On the other hand, if you stifle your anger, it can make you increasingly frustrated and irritable, ruin your sleep or your digestion, and cause you to feel bitter about everything around you. And if you try to suppress your anger totally, it may burst out anyway—hotter than ever—at the worst possible time, and maybe directed at the wrong person.

If you have a strong tendency toward one extreme or the other—letting your anger burst out or choking it down—you need to modify that habit in order to handle your anger effectively.

ACTIVITY 5.3

NAME _____

How Do I Express Anger?

Answer the following questions as accurately as you can.

1. In a typical situation that makes you mad, how openly do you express your anger? Rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 meaning that you keep the anger completely hidden, 10 meaning that you express it directly and hotly. Mark the appropriate number below.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. Think of a time when you expressed anger in a way that matches the rating you just gave yourself. Describe exactly what you did or said (or what you didn't do or say):

3. How effective was this expression of anger? Mark the appropriate responses.

Effective in relieving your feelings:

- Very effective
 Somewhat effective
 Not effective at all

Effective in moving the conflict toward resolution:

- Very effective
 Somewhat effective
 Not effective at all

4. Do you think you need to change the way you express your anger? If so, how?

Seven Steps for Managing Anger

Luckily, “letting it out” and “keeping it in” are not the only alternatives for dealing with anger. There is a more sophisticated way: you can manage your anger. That is, you can express it in a controlled, measured way—a way that maximizes your chances of improving the situation rather than worsening it.

How can you do this? It’s not easy or automatic, but here are seven practical steps that can help:

Step 1: *Accept the fact that you’re angry.*

Acknowledge your responsibility for dealing with the emotion. Resist the urge to blame someone else for your anger. If, for example, a coworker describes a procedure you should use to address a work problem and you are reprimanded by your boss for handling the situation incorrectly, one reaction might be to become angry at your coworker. However, the responsibility for double checking the solution with your boss was yours, so the anger should be directed at yourself.

Step 2: *Decide exactly what you’re mad about.*

- ◆ Analyze the source of your feelings, and separate the real problem from minor, insignificant matters.

- ◆ If there are some deep emotions underlying the surface problem, try to identify them. For instance, if your boss walks through the office and says “Hi” to your coworker but doesn’t speak to you, and you get mad about that, why are you mad? Just because of the boss’s rudeness? Because you think the boss doesn’t recognize your contributions? Or because you think your coworker is trying to undermine you somehow?

- Step 3:** *Be sure you understand the facts of the situation.* For example, if you’re angry because you heard from Jacob that Sara made a sarcastic comment about you, make certain that Sara actually said such a thing, and then try to figure out the context in which she said it. Could it have been an innocent remark?



Anger Management

Did you know?

Because anger is a stress-inducer, many techniques that reduce stress can also help you manage anger. For example:

- ◆ Take some deep breaths.
- ◆ Visualize a relaxing experience.
- ◆ Exercise till you’re tired and ready to relax.
- ◆ Take a warm bath or a long shower.
- ◆ Listen to soothing music.

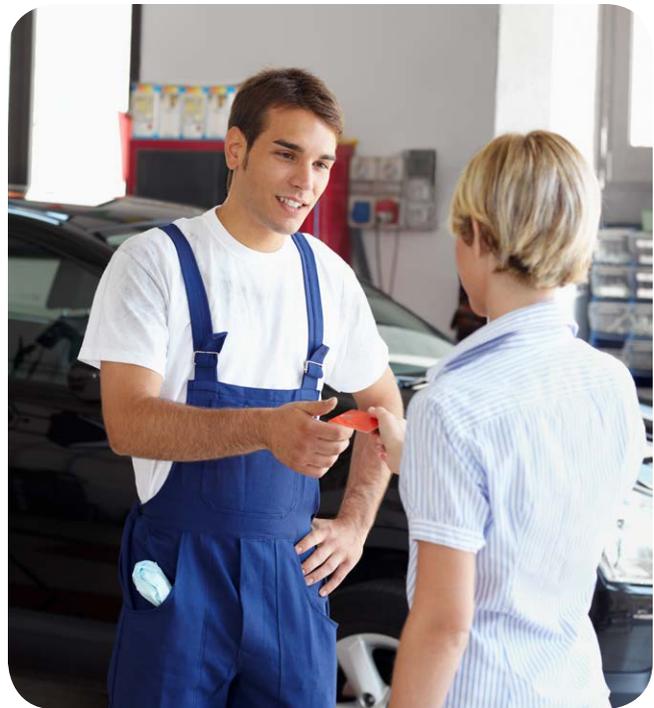
Step 4: *Decide whom you can speak to about the problem.*

- ◆ Usually the best person to address is the one at whom you're angry.
- ◆ In some cases, however, another person might be appropriate: your supervisor, perhaps, or a neutral party whom you trust to give you good advice.

Step 5: *When you speak up, do it in an assertive, not aggressive, manner, as described in Workshop 4.*

- ◆ Describe the problem objectively.
- ◆ Also describe your feelings, your needs, and your desires.
- ◆ Focus on the goal you want to achieve.
- ◆ Avoid self-pity, whining, or complaining that will undermine your point.

Step 6: *Propose a solution that would be acceptable to you and also potentially acceptable to the other person.* "Roger, I don't expect an apology for your blaming a mistake on me. But now that you understand my feelings, I hope you'll refrain from doing that in the future. I will do my best to treat you in the same professional manner."



Step 7: *Afterward, reflect on the entire experience and learn from it.*

- ◆ Think about whether you managed your anger in the best possible way.
- ◆ Decide whether you should modify your approach in the future.
- ◆ Consider multiple approaches to handling your anger issues in the future.
- ◆ Practice the behaviors you will use when you become angry.

Holding onto anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else. You are the one who gets burned.

— GAUTAMA BUDDHA
Primary figure in Buddhism

ACTIVITY 5.4

NAME _____

Applying the Seven Steps

Think of another situation in which you have been severely angry. Describe how you could have handled it better, using each of the seven steps.

The situation was:

Here's what I could have done and said:

Step 1

Step 2

Step 3

Step 4

Step 5

Step 6

Step 7



GETTING CONNECTED

The World Wide Web offers an enormous number of resources that can help you learn to handle your anger. Just enter the phrase anger management in a search engine and you'll find numerous sites.

For example, the MayoClinic article *Anger Management: 10 Tips to Tame Your Temper* is available at:

<https://myqss.link/Anger-Management>

Life Supports offers helpful information in the article *10 Types of Anger: What's Your Anger Style?* at:

<https://myqss.link/Anger-Style>

Scroll down for the article.

WORKSHOP WRAP-UP

- Anger usually arises as a defensive response when we feel vulnerable.
- Without proper management, anger can have severe consequences for relationships, morale, and personal health.
- The responsibility for anger lies with the person who feels the anger, not with anyone else.
- The extremes of letting anger out and keeping it in can both be harmful. A better way is to try consciously to manage your anger.
- Practical steps for managing anger include accepting responsibility, clarifying the emotional and factual details, speaking about the matter assertively, and reflecting on the experience afterward.

NOTES:

Preventing Conflict

Workshop

Someday I'm going to have it out with that guy Orlando in the mail room," Michael says to Sergei over lunch in the company cafeteria. "I just can't get along with him."

"You can't? Why not?"

"Because he's got a huge chip on his shoulder. For instance, last Friday I dropped a stack of outgoing mail from my department on the counter. All I said was, 'Have a nice weekend,' and he snarled at me."

"Snarled?"

I've never heard him snarl."

"Well, he muttered something in another language. Something that sounded pretty foul. That sort of person has a temper, you know."

"He's always seemed easygoing to me. When did this happen, exactly?"

"Oh, about five minutes before quitting time."

Sergei thought for a moment and then chuckled. "Mike, he probably thought you were being sarcastic. See, you dumped a load of work on him at the end of the day and then wished him a nice weekend—it sounds like a bad joke."

"I didn't mean it that way. And even if I did, that's no excuse for cursing me."

"You don't know that he cursed you—you couldn't understand him, you said so yourself. He could've been grumbling that he'd be late for dinner with his girlfriend. Or maybe he was still upset about the Stanley Cup playoffs. He's a terrific fan."

"What, he cares about ice hockey? How do you know that?"

"We gab all the time when I'm in the mail room. Look, Mike, he's a regular guy, but if he rubs you the wrong way, just stay away from him. And if you feel you're

getting mad, count to ten before you say anything."

Now Michael laughs. "You sound like my mother! Do you have any other precious wisdom for me today?"

"Eat your carrots," Sergei says, and Michael throws a mock punch at him across the table.



What's Inside

Here, you will learn to

- ◆ minimize problems of interpretation
- ◆ deal with your own stereotypes
- ◆ make simple changes to prevent conflict

“An Ounce of Prevention”

Can you see why Sergei’s advice was valuable?

Michael was heading toward a potential conflict—one that may have been totally unnecessary. And Michael made conflict more likely by his own tendencies. For instance, he jumped to conclusions by assuming that Orlando was cursing him. Also, when he said that Orlando’s “sort of person” had a temper, he may have been relying on a stereotype—perhaps a stereotype about ethnic groups, about mail room personnel, or about some other loose classification of people. And instead of trying to



clarify what Orlando was thinking, Michael nursed his own grudge. The result was that a minor incident threatened to swell to larger proportions.

“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,” the age-old maxim tells us. In addition to what you’ve learned earlier in this book about giving and receiving criticism and handling your anger, this workshop will introduce you to further techniques for preventing conflict before it starts.

Problems of Perception and Interpretation

How do we get to know about other people?

At the most basic level, we rely on our perceptions, especially sight and hearing. That is, we learn about people by seeing what they look like, watching them act, listening to what they say to us and to others, hearing what others say about them, and so on.

Our perceptions are marvelous sources of information. Unfortunately, they are often wrong. Sometimes our eyes and ears simply mislead us. When a coworker passes you in the hall, you may think you heard her whisper to a friend, “My boss is a stupid dunce,” when what she actually said was, “My boss is stupendous.”

Most often, though, our errors are caused by the way our perceptions slide immediately into interpretation. We’re always trying to make sense of what we see and hear. No sooner do we perceive something than our brains start to categorize it, label it, decide what it means. And these interpretations are prone to distortion and bias.

Psychologists have identified many different ways in which perception and interpretation distort our ideas about other people. Let’s look at a few of them.

“
Always keep your
composure. You can’t score
from the penalty box:
and to win you have to score.

— **BOBBY HULL**

Former Canadian hockey player

”

First Impressions

One common problem is our tendency to rely on first impressions. After we form an impression of someone, we're very reluctant to change it. In fact, we tend to ignore or downplay later information that contradicts our first impression. Once you've decided that George is a sorehead, repeated nice behavior on George's part may have little effect on your opinion of him.

Our Implicit Personality Theories

Another problem arises from our *implicit personality theories*. We have implicit (unspoken) assumptions about which personality traits and behaviors naturally belong together.

That is, we assume that if a person is, say, kind toward animals, that person is also warm and tolerant toward human beings.

Sometimes the link we assume may be accurate; other times, not. If your implicit personality

theory tells you that people who yell at others are mean and cold, you may fail to realize that the loud fellow on the loading dock is really a kind person despite his bluster.

The Fundamental Attribution Error

Still another frequent problem is what some psychologists call the *fundamental attribution error*. When we interpret someone's behavior in a certain situation, we tend to attribute too much of the behavior to personal characteristics and too little to the situation.

For example, if you see someone banging his fist on his desk after a call from a client, you may

interpret that to mean he has a bad temper. In reality, you might have responded the same way yourself if you'd heard that client's complaint. Maybe the client was really abusive on the phone.



? Did you know?

In a classic experiment conducted by Solomon Asch in the 1940s, one group of people was told that a certain person was “intelligent, industrious, impulsive, critical, stubborn, and envious.” A second group heard exactly the same description, but with the order of the terms reversed.

The group that heard the first list—with the positive traits named first—had a much more favorable opinion of the person than the group that heard the second list. First impressions do count!

For Further Examples of the Fundamental Attribution Error, Look at These Common Occurrences:

Event	Common Response (Blaming the Person)	More Thoughtful Response (Considering the Situation)
A child screams in a restaurant.	“What a bratty kid!”	“Maybe that child has a stomach ache.”
An elected official gives an evasive answer at a news conference.	“She’s a typical politician, concerned only about getting re-elected.”	“That question was nearly impossible for anyone to answer.”
A speeding driver cuts in front of your car.	“Reckless idiot!”	“Hmm, I wonder if that woman in the back seat is in labor.”
An old friend passes by without acknowledging you.	“He’s getting stuck up.”	“He could be worrying about that big project he has to finish by tomorrow.”

Preventing Errors of Perception and Interpretation

How can you prevent errors of perception and interpretation? You probably can’t prevent them entirely. But once you accept that you—like all other people—are prone to them, you can minimize their effect. The following techniques can help:

- ◆ Check your perceptions. Did you actually hear what you thought you heard?
- ◆ Instead of assuming you know why someone behaved the way he or she did, think about other possible interpretations.
- ◆ Seek additional information. For example, talk to the person in question or to someone else who knows the situation. That will help you decide which interpretation is correct.
- ◆ Separate your feelings from the matter you’re investigating. Try to stay objective.

Stereotypes: A Necessary Evil?

Perhaps the most troublesome problems in perception and interpretation result from our use of stereotypes. *Stereotypes* are our beliefs that certain groups of people tend to have distinct characteristics.

You may be accustomed to hearing that stereotypes are prejudicial and that you should avoid them at all costs. Taken to an extreme, though, that sort of advice is impractical. Actually, all of us rely on stereotypes every day.

Imagine you're a waiter or waitress in an ethnic restaurant where some of the food is very spicy. A customer orders a dish, and you ask her how hot she'd like it. "Oh, medium, I guess," she says vaguely. You have to convey her wishes accurately to the chef. Would it be wrong of you to make some assumptions based on her apparent group characteristics? Not at all—in fact, if you're a conscientious server, you'll

definitely try to interpret her notion of "medium" by taking into account her age, her apparent ethnic group, and so on.

The point is that, in dealing with other people, you can never have complete information about them. At work, you probably know little about the personal lives, feelings, and opinions of most of your

fellow employees. Yet, to interact effectively with them, you need to predict how they're likely to respond to various situations. To make these predictions, you often rely on your ideas about certain groups, and you adjust your behavior accordingly.

Say you encounter a middle-aged vice president in the cafeteria. You probably assume that he or she would not be interested in hearing about an upcoming rock concert that you've mentioned to several coworkers. Maybe that prediction is true, maybe not. In either case, adjusting your behavior according to your stereotype is natural and harmless.



Stereotypes That Cause Problems

When is it, then, that stereotypes cause problems? Stereotypes are most likely to become a hindrance rather than a help when they are:

1. Negative.
2. Inflexible.
3. Offensive to others.

A negative stereotype

Mrs. Rabinowicz in Purchasing is in her sixties, and she speaks very slowly. You assume her mental faculties must have declined, and as a result, you fail to heed her excellent advice.

An inflexible stereotype

Bonnie is a physical therapist who's scarcely five feet tall and must weigh less than 100 pounds. You're certain she's not strong enough for the most strenuous aspects of the job, even though you've seen her supporting a professional football player who is recovering from knee surgery.

An offensive stereotype

Whenever you see Hakeem in the hallway, you stop to chat for a minute about the latest basketball scores. You assume that because he's tall and African American, he's interested in the subject. One day, though, he gets annoyed at you. "Just because I'm black," he says, "you think all I care about is basketball? Why don't you ever ask me about opera?"

? Did you know?

In 1955 a researcher named Mason Haire published a study of stereotypes in organizations. After preparing photographs of two men, Haire showed these photos to 108 business managers. Half the managers were told that the first photo showed a plant manager and the second photo a labor official. The other half of the group was given the same identifications for the photos, but in reverse. Then Haire asked the participants to describe the men shown in the photos.

What do you think happened?

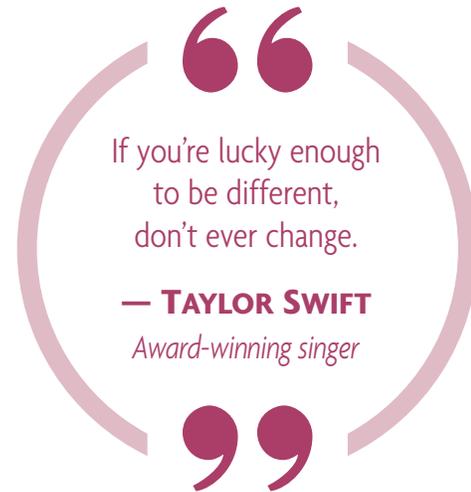
The business managers described the man labeled a "plant manager" as more dependable and honest than the man labeled a "union official"—no matter which photo these labels were applied to! Haire did the same experiment with a group of 76 union leaders. Your prediction? Right! The union leaders had just the opposite reaction: they thought the "union official" looked more dependable and honest—again, no matter which photo bore the union label!

What to Do About Harmful Stereotypes

What can you do if—like almost everyone else—you harbor some negative, inflexible, or potentially offensive stereotypes? The following approach may be useful:

- ◆ Because you probably can't avoid putting people into categories, try to use more categories rather than fewer. That is, break the broad categories down into smaller ones that allow you to make finer distinctions. Rather than labeling someone a “middle manager,” for example, perhaps you could identify her as “an experienced mid-level manager from the Human Resources Department.”

- ◆ Be conscious of the assumptions you're making about other people—and sensitive to their reactions when you show evidence of those assumptions.
- ◆ Always strive to keep yourself open to new information about other people.



ACTIVITY 6.2

NAME _____

Checking My Stereotypes

Here's what I could have done and said:

1. Read the following labels for certain groups in our society. For each group, write down whatever "typical" characteristics come to your mind.

Career women: _____

Welfare mothers: _____

Mexican immigrants: _____

Irish American policemen: _____

Hip-hop stars: _____

Librarians: _____

Bookkeepers: _____

Jewish grandmothers: _____

Used car salesmen: _____

Drivers of station wagons: _____

Motorcycle club members: _____

Computer programmers: _____

Politicians: _____

Corporate lawyers: _____

2. What other groups in your daily environment have strong stereotypical associations?

Group

Associated characteristics

3. Can you think of any friend or coworker who would have no stereotypes about the groups you've described in items 1 and 2?

4. What does this exercise suggest about the stereotypes common to you and the groups or organizations you belong to?

Behavior Patterns

Imagine that you drive to work every day on a terrible, winding road that is full of potholes and clogged with traffic. You hate the situation. What would you do about it? The simplest thing to do, of course, would be to change your route.

It's the same with conflicts in which you find yourself, especially the predictable ones that come up again and again. Often the easiest and best option is to take another route—that is, change some of the simple behavior patterns that are leading you toward the conflict. There are many possible changes you can make, including these:

Avoiding unpleasant topics.

Often you know which subjects are likely to “raise someone’s hackles” or “yank someone’s chain.” So avoid these subjects yourself, and if someone else steers a conversation that way, try to change the topic.

Ignoring minor problems.

Some disagreements just aren't worth bothering about. Maybe Jim always uses all the cream in the coffee room and never replaces it. It's an annoying habit of his, but so what? Focus on the larger goals and ignore the trivialities.



“Prejudice, which sees what it pleases, cannot see what is plain.”

— **AUBREY THOMAS DE VERE**

Irish poet and critic

Dismissing put-downs.

If someone makes a comment that you feel puts you down, refuse to let it bother you. If there's a grain of truth in it, learn from it; but if it's wrong, stupid, or thoughtless, you can just ignore it. Often the best response is none at all. But if you have to respond, don't start trading insults; instead, choose a comeback that shows you aren't concerned:

“No kidding!”

“That's okay, just don't tell my mother.”

“I'll have to look that up when I get home.”

“Really? Thanks for telling me.” One further technique is useful in practically every situation where conflict might arise: consciously try to raise your tolerance for disagreement. Granted, that's easier said than done. But even if you have a very thin skin, you can make it somewhat thicker by reminding yourself of two simple facts:

1. You're a conscientious, competent person, no matter what others may think.
2. Some conflicts just aren't worth your time or effort—you have better things to do.



GETTING CONNECTED

Because the World Wide Web has become a gathering place for many thousands of social and cultural groups, you can use Websites to explore groups that remain a mystery to you.

Here's one useful exercise from Culture Trip.

To learn surprising customs around the world, go to:

<https://myqss.link/World-Customs>

Or go to *SC Magazine* to learn amazing cultural facts and traditions around the world:

<https://myqss.link/Cultural-Facts-Traditions>

WORKSHOP WRAP-UP

- You can reduce the potential for conflict by working to minimize common distortions of perception and interpretation, such as over-reliance on first impressions.
- Stereotypes foster conflict when they are negative, inflexible, or offensive to others.
- You can often prevent conflict with simple changes in your behavior, such as avoiding unpleasant topics and ignoring put-downs.

Sharif, Luis, and Lianne—and two other members of the Diversity Task Force (DTF)—have gathered for an urgent chat in the lunch room.

Their topic is Albert, whom they all agree is a disruptive force on the team.

“The whole point of the DTF,” Lianne says, “is to suggest ways for people in our company to work better together. But Albert can’t work with anybody! He draws up his own lists of recommendations, insists they’re the only ideas worth considering, and doesn’t listen to anyone else.”

“Right,” says Sharif. “At the last meeting I wanted to toss my coffee in his face.”

“Somehow I don’t think that would help,” Luis puts in. “Maybe he’s got some personal issues we don’t know about.”

“I don’t care about his personal issues,” Lianne states. “I say we should just ignore him.”

“That’s impossible,” Sharif contends, “because he’s too argumentative. Somebody needs to confront him, tell him he’s just not fitting in.”

“Or,” Luis proposes, “we could go to the department head and ask to have him removed from the DTF.”

“Then we’ll look like the ones who can’t cooperate,” Sharif says. “Maybe you were right a minute ago, Luis—maybe we should try to find

out what the guy’s issues are, and see if there’s some way of dealing with them.”

“I guess I could do that,” Lianne supposes. “I mean, I could

talk to him before the next meeting. Some of his ideas aren’t half bad, so I could say, ‘Look, we value your contributions, Al, but sometimes it seems like other people’s proposals are being crowded out.’”

“Okay,” says Sharif, “it’s worth a try. If that doesn’t work, we can appeal to the boss.”



What’s Inside

Here, you will learn to

- ◆ understand conflict management strategies
- ◆ collaborate to resolve conflict
- ◆ deal effectively with someone else’s anger

Conflict Management Strategies

Like Sharif, Luis, and Lianne, all of us sometimes face conflicts with coworkers or even with friends. No matter how much we apply the principles of earlier workshops in this book, conflicts do arise, and we have to cope with them. But considering the number of conflicts that turn out badly, it seems that we often don't choose the best methods of coping. So how can we improve?

Looking at the ways people typically handle conflicts, psychologists have described five basic strategies of conflict management. Most of us have built-in preferences—we tend to use one method rather than another, without thinking much about it. If we become aware of all the options, however, we can make better choices.

That's the basic principle of this workshop: By learning about the different strategies that are available, you can begin to make yourself a true *manager* of conflict, rather than someone who merely suffers from it.

Let's look at the five conflict management strategies that psychologists have identified.

Avoidance

The strategy of *avoidance*, sometimes called *withdrawal*, involves stepping away from the conflict and ignoring it as much as possible. An avoider basically refuses to get involved in the matter. This strategy can be useful when the problem is trivial or when you don't care about the outcome.

When you use avoidance as a deliberate strategy, it's not the same as sticking your head in the sand and pretending the problem doesn't exist. It simply means that you choose not to pursue a particular conflict because you consider other things more important.

Accommodation

When you use the *accommodation* style of conflict management, you give up the strong pursuit of your own goals. You show that you are willing to put your goals aside, at least temporarily, in order to accommodate the other person.

Like avoidance, accommodation can be a useful approach—as long as you employ it strategically, rather than because you're weak or afraid of a fuss. For instance, maybe you realize that the other person's goal is really more important than yours. Or you may value your relationship with the other person more than you value the goal you're setting aside. Or you may decide that being agreeable now will help you achieve a more important goal later on.

Five Easy Ways NOT to Resolve a Conflict

- ✓ Pretend it doesn't exist.
- ✓ When you do things that others won't like, try to keep them secret.
- ✓ Set up so many complicated conditions for resolving the conflict that no progress is made.
- ✓ Try to discredit your opponents by whispering nasty things behind their backs.
- ✓ Call in sick a lot so you don't have to face the problem.

Compromise

The strategy of *compromise* means “splitting the difference” or “meeting in the middle.” That is, each party sacrifices some part of his or her goal in order to resolve the conflict and get on with other matters. Neither person is completely satisfied, and neither is terribly unhappy.

Like the two preceding strategies, compromise works best when the goal you have been pursuing is not greatly important to you. It can also be helpful when there isn’t time to work out a more complex solution.

Competition

Unlike the three previous strategies, *competition* does not involve any willingness to give up your goal. In fact, this strategy is sometimes called *forcing*, because it means that you try to force others to go along with you. If you win the competition, your goal will be satisfied, and other people’s goals will fall by the wayside.

Competition is the essential “win-lose” strategy. You want to win even if others have to lose. Obviously, if you follow this strategy much of the time, you’re not likely to gain many

friends among your coworkers. However, there are times when competition is the strategy of choice: for instance, when it’s vital to act quickly and you’re convinced your way is right.



Differing Views of Compromise

Edmund Burke, a British political thinker of the 1700s, once said that “All government, indeed every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue, and every prudent act, is founded on compromise and barter.”

Charles Sumner, a U.S. senator during the Civil War era, had a different view. “It is by compromise,” Sumner declared, “that human rights have been abandoned.”

Who do you think was closer to the truth? Why?

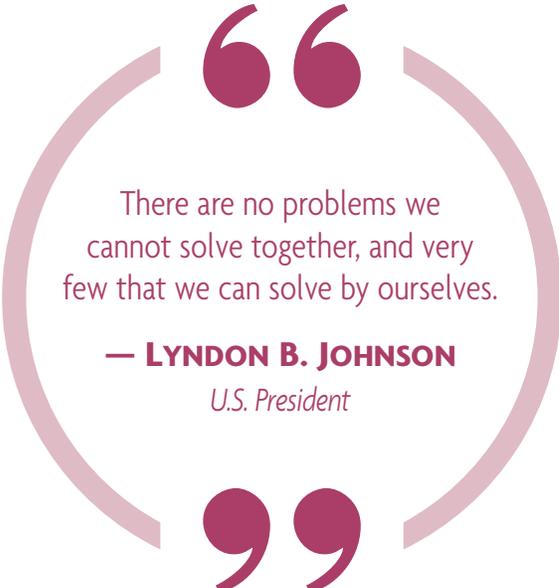
Collaboration

The final strategy in conflict management, *collaboration*, is one in which both parties work together to find a mutually acceptable solution.

Think back to the distinction between constructive and destructive conflicts in Workshop 1. Collaboration is the strategy most likely to make a conflict constructive rather than destructive. It is a “win-win” rather than “win-lose” approach: that is, it tries to fulfill the goals of both parties rather than just one party. In doing so, it can increase creativity, improve an organization’s decisions, and strengthen personal relationships.

Often the collaborative approach is known as *problem solving*, because its key is that the parties see the conflict as a mutual problem that they must work together to solve.

If collaboration is so great, you may be wondering, why don’t we use it in every situation? For one thing, it requires commitment on the part of both parties to achieving a solution.



There are no problems we cannot solve together, and very few that we can solve by ourselves.

— **LYNDON B. JOHNSON**
U.S. President

Sometimes, even if you are willing, the other person isn’t. Also, collaboration often takes a good deal of time and effort, so it is most appropriate when both the goals of the two parties and their personal relationship are of high importance.

A Gender Difference?

Some research suggests that men are more apt to use a competitive conflict strategy than women. The other four strategies—avoidance, accommodation, compromise, and collaboration—are more likely to appeal to women.

This finding fits with other research showing that, in conversation, men are likely to be more aggressive, assertive, and competitive than women (see Workshop 4).

Do you think these differences are in our genes, or are they simply a product of the way our society defines traditional roles for the two sexes? Do these differences affect conflict management in the organization where you work?

ACTIVITY 7.1

NAME _____

Assessing My Conflict Management Strategies

Reflect on a recent conflict you have had, and then answer the following questions:

1. Briefly, what were the competing goals?

Mine:

The other party's:

2. Of the five conflict management strategies, which best describes your approach to the conflict?

Explain your choice.

3. Which conflict management strategy do you think best describes the other party's approach? Explain.

4. If you had followed a different strategy, would it have changed the other party's strategy? Why or why not?

5. Considering the outcome, was your choice of strategies the right one? Why or why not?

Successful Collaboration

Although collaboration is often the best strategy for important disputes, few people are really talented at it. That's because it takes both thought and practice. You have to be a good negotiator, willing and able to participate in a give-and-take process. Let's examine what's involved in collaborative negotiation.

Two Fundamental Challenges

When you try to negotiate a collaborative solution to conflict, you face two basic challenges:

Challenge No. 1: How Open Should You Be?

There is no absolute answer to this question. Obviously there are situations in which you will not want to reveal all your thoughts and feelings. But in order to resolve the conflict, you have to be honest at least about the immediate problems; otherwise, you're not really collaborating.

Challenge No. 2: How Much Should You Trust the Other Person?

This is the flip side of Challenge No. 1, and again the trick is to find the right balance. On one hand, if you don't trust a word the person says, there's no point in trying to collaborate. On the other hand, if the other person is an exploitative sort and you accept everything at face value, he or she may take advantage of you.

As the problem-solving discussion progresses, your approach to these two challenges may gradually evolve. If you're truly committed to the effort, you may find that you become both more open and more trusting, and the other party does likewise. That greatly increases the chances for a win-win conclusion.



Ten Steps to Success

Once you decide to collaborate in resolving a conflict, there are ten steps you can use to maximize your success:

1. **Begin right away.** Postponing an attempt to collaborate on solving a conflict often lets the problem grow worse. The sooner a problem is resolved, the greater the productivity.
2. **Clarify your concerns.** You and the other person need to express your concerns clearly to each other in order to identify the source of the conflict. State your emotions as well as your opinions—if you're mad, the other party needs to know you're mad, and why.
3. **Reach a mutual, specific definition of the problem.** Before the two of you can solve any problem, you have to agree what it is. And the more narrowly you both define it, the better chance you have of mastering it. If you have a large-scale conflict with someone, try to break that down into smaller matters. Address one matter at a time.
4. **Look for shared goals.** Beyond your conflict, there are probably larger goals that both of you share: for instance, doing what's best for the organization, looking good to the boss, and so on. You must be able to trust the other person enough to share your goals.
5. **In light of those shared goals, think of multiple potential solutions to the conflict.** Take a brainstorming approach. Toss out as many potential alternatives as you can, and encourage the other person to do the same. Remember that ideas generate other ideas.
6. **Analyze the potential solutions and choose the one that best satisfies both parties.** Since this is not a perfect world, none of the solutions you've identified may be perfect. But the two of you should make the best choice possible.



7. **Decide on ways to implement the solution.** Be sure you define the solution in terms of what you and the other person will do or not do. In his popular book *Reaching Out*, psychologist David W. Johnson suggests three criteria for defining each party's responsibilities for carrying out such an agreement:

- ◆ The responsibilities should be stated in a very specific way: “who does what, when, where, and how.”
- ◆ The actions specified should be realistic: “each can do what he or she is agreeing to do.”
- ◆ The responsibilities are mutual: “everyone agrees to do something different.”

8. **Show your own commitment to the solution.** The next time you encounter the person, live up to your end of the bargain. Let your behavior give ample evidence that you remember the agreement and intend to honor it.

9. **Don't assume one tiny violation of the agreement destroys the whole.**

Even if you're perfect in living up to your bargain, the other person may not be. Don't expect perfection. Tolerate a few lapses. When appropriate, offer gentle reminders of the terms to which you've both agreed.

10. **If all else fails, appeal to higher authority.**

Perhaps your supervisor will need to intervene. If so, it's better that you request assistance before the matter gets out of hand. It's better still if both you and the other party calmly and rationally ask your boss to help settle the dispute.

Often, when you work through these steps with another person, you'll find that your relationship is strengthened by the process. Perhaps your self-knowledge will improve as well.

? Did you know?

In his book *An Alternative to War or Surrender*, published in 1962—a time of high international tensions—Charles Osgood proposed a strategy for managing conflicts. He called it GRIT, an acronym for “graduated and reciprocated initiatives in tension reduction.” It's basically a way of enticing the other party to collaborate with you.

GRIT involves these basic steps:

- ◆ State clearly that you intend to reduce the tension and conflict and ask the other party to follow suit.
- ◆ Whether or not the other party responds, take specific actions to reduce tension.
- ◆ When and if the other party takes a step toward peace, you respond by taking another, larger step.
- ◆ If the other party attacks you instead of cooperating, you retaliate, in a way that is neither more nor less severe than the provocation.
- ◆ Once you've retaliated, you resume your actions to reduce the tension.

Osgood argued that these steps would defuse many conflicts among nations. Do you think they would also help in everyday situations—for instance, in conflicts between you and your coworkers or friends?

ACTIVITY 7.2

NAME _____

Checking My Collaboration Skills

Think of a time when you've tried to collaborate with someone to resolve a conflict—that is, you've spoken to the person and directly addressed the issue of the conflict between you. Analyze what happened in terms of the two challenges and the ten steps just outlined.

1. Did a lack of trust or openness on the part of either person hinder the collaboration process? If so, how?
2. Of the ten steps, which proved the most difficult?
3. Did both of you have the same amount of trouble with that step? Or did one of you find it easier than the other? Explain.
4. Regardless of how you answered the preceding questions, what could you have done to make the process smoother?

Dealing with Another Person's Anger

In Workshop 5 you learned some techniques for handling your own anger, but what if the immediate problem is another person's anger? If someone else gets so mad that the two of you can't begin to address the real issues behind the conflict, what can you do?

The following steps can help you cope with the situation:

- ◆ Keep calm yourself. Understand that the other person's anger is probably defensive and there's no need for you to get mad in return.
- ◆ Be careful of the language you use. Avoid anything that might be interpreted as a negative, critical, or scornful comment.
- ◆ Keep trying to focus the other person's attention on the real problem underlying the anger.
- ◆ Try stating what you think is the main bone of contention, and ask if you've understood it correctly. Invite the other person to correct any misunderstanding on your part.

“
Speak when you are angry,
and you will make the best
speech you will ever regret.

— **AMBROSE BIERCE**
American journalist

- ◆ Express your own feelings in a constructive manner. This will set a good example, helping convince the other person to reciprocate with a calm, rational expression of his or her feelings.
- ◆ If necessary, call “time out.” Say that you're feeling too upset to find a good solution and you need time to clear your head. (Notice that you take the responsibility for the time out, rather than accusing the other person of needing it.) Then resume the conversation later when the other person has had a chance to calm down.



ACTIVITY 7.3

NAME _____

Assessing My Knowledge of Conflict Management

Are the following statements true or false? Mark the appropriate letter for each item.

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| 1. For every winner in a conflict, there has to be a loser. | T | F |
| 2. Avoiding a conflict is never a good way to deal with it. | T | F |
| 3. On important issues, compromise is not the best alternative. | T | F |
| 4. Collaboration is the easiest way to resolve a conflict. | T | F |
| 5. Collaboration involves finding shared goals. | T | F |
| 6. In a crunch, you shouldn't be afraid to fight for what you believe. | T | F |
| 7. If someone is angry, there's no point in talking with him or her. | T | F |
| 8. It's wrong to give up the fight because you're worried about your relationship with the other person. | T | F |
| 9. In order to collaborate successfully, you need to keep your emotions to yourself. | T | F |
| 10. Conflict can end up strengthening the bond between two people. | T | F |

1. F, 2. F, 3. T, 4. F, 5. T, 6. T, 7. F, 8. F, 9. F, 10. T



GETTING CONNECTED

Forbes, Inc., and other business magazines typically offer a number of articles related to conflict and conflict management. Enter the words “*Workplace Conflict*” into a search engine and you will be able to choose among many articles.

WORKSHOP WRAP-UP

- Psychologists have identified five basic conflict management strategies: avoidance, accommodation, compromise, competition, and collaboration. Each of these strategies has its uses.
- Collaboration takes the most time and energy, but it is the one true “win-win” strategy.
- Collaboration depends on defining the problem clearly and looking for goals that both parties share.
- Even if the other person is very angry, you can make progress toward resolving the conflict by keeping calm yourself, trying to focus attention on the underlying problem, and expressing your thoughts and feelings in a constructive manner.

Being a Peacemaker

Although Dieu has seen the conflict building, she didn't feel it was her place to interfere. Tony and Breenana, two other nurses at the health clinic, just can't seem to get along with each other, but Dieu isn't their supervisor, so what can she do about it?

Today, however, she sees how their disagreements are affecting their work. After taking a patient's history, Breenana sets the patient's chart on a counter for the doctor to pick up. "Excuse me," she says with exaggerated politeness as she passes Tony, who is sorting through other files at the same counter. A moment later, Tony plops a stack of folders on top of Breenana's chart, burying it.

"Wait," Dieu says, "there's a new chart under there. Breenana just put it down."

Tony grumbles something and Dieu isn't sure he understood her. Then he points a finger at another counter across the hall and says, "Charts waiting for the doctors belong there."

Dieu digs the new chart out of the pile and moves it across the hall. "Hey, Tony," she says, "it's not a big deal,

okay? We can put the charts wherever you like. But I'm worried about this friction between you two."

"Talk to her about it," he snaps.

"Okay, I will," Dieu says, "but is there any way I could help? I'm sure you don't want these disagreements to interfere with the rest of the staff and the patients."

Dieu also speaks with Breenana, who seems to be harboring similar hostilities. When

Dieu sees Tony again, she says she wants to take him and Breenana to lunch. "My treat," she says. "The one condition is that you must be nice to each other. And maybe we'll talk about what's really bothering you two."

Tony grimaces, but he agrees.



Workshop
8

What's Inside

Here, you will learn to

- ◆ to help others resolve conflicts
- ◆ understand the role of mediation
- ◆ follow twelve steps to effective mediation

Intervening in Conflicts

You've probably been in a position similar to Dieu's. You see two coworkers involved in an ongoing quarrel, building up resentments against each other, for causes that seem trivial. Or perhaps you've witnessed conflicts that begin with a significant issue that ought to be debated, but then become so personal and bitter that they create "more heat than light," as the old saying puts it.

If you've developed good skills at handling your own conflicts, as described in the earlier workshops in this book, you may find opportunities to serve as a peacemaker between others. That can greatly increase your effectiveness in any group environment, from an executive suite to a bowling league.

But if you do try to smooth other people's conflicts, what is the best way to go about it? This workshop will help you hone your techniques.

ACTIVITY 8.1

NAME _____

Your Approach to Peacemaking

1. When you see two coworkers or friends involved in a conflict with each other, what do you normally do? Put a check mark beside the statement that best describes your typical response.

- I pretend the conflict doesn't exist.
- I try to lie low and stay out of it.
- If it bothers me, I just tell both people to knock it off.
- If one or both people talk about it with me, I listen, but I don't take sides.
- If one or both people talk about it with me, I give them my opinion.
- If an opportunity arises, I say something I think could help resolve the conflict.
- I approach both parties and seek out ways to help them solve the problem.

2. Typically, when you do decide to intervene in other people's conflicts, how effective are you? Do you help the people reach a good solution? Or do your attempts often backfire? Rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 5, marking the appropriate number:

①
Ineffective

②

③
Moderately effective

④

⑤
Very effective

3. Compare your answers to questions 1 and 2. Is your typical behavior toward other people's conflicts appropriate for your level of effectiveness? Does the comparison indicate you should get involved more often? Less often?

Being a Mediator

Sometimes, in work situations, two people in a dispute formally agree to have a third party help them resolve it. That process is called *mediation*, and some organizations have explicit procedures for it. In a large firm or a government agency, a supervisor may issue a referral that sends the disputing parties to a mediation unit, where the staff has undergone specific training in the arts of mediating.

Most often, however, mediation occurs in an informal way. Two people who have been arguing call on a third person to help settle the issue. Or perhaps the third party volunteers to help. These informal types of mediation are the ones you are most likely to experience. Perhaps you've realized that you could use mediation more often or more effectively than you do now.

There's one important distinction to remember. A mediator is not an *arbitrator*. An arbitrator is someone who is empowered to make a judgment in the case. After hearing both sides, an arbitrator rules one way or the other, and the parties must accept that ruling. Major League Baseball, for example, has a system of salary arbitration: the team and the player submit separate figures for the player's salary, and the arbitrator then makes the final, binding decision.

In mediation, in contrast, the parties don't have to agree to any outcome they don't like.

One or both parties can reject the mediator's suggestions. But this lack of power to enforce a decision doesn't necessarily limit a mediator's influence. Sometimes, in fact, the parties will relax and become more reasonable because they know they can't be forced to yield.

The purpose of mediation is to acquaint each side with the suffering of the other.

— BRIAN MULDOON
Author of *The Heart of Conflict*

? Did you know?

Many North American colleges and universities now offer mediation services for both students and faculty. These services focus on disputes concerning grades, housing, and much more. For instance, a student who has a disagreement with a landlord can often turn to the college mediators for help.

Advantages of Mediation

Whether mediation is formal or informal, it offers a number of advantages. Compared to letting the warring people work out the dispute on their own, good mediation helps to:

- ◆ Get the two “parties communicating directly about the problem.
- ◆ Identify solutions that the parties might not have discovered on their own.
- ◆ Reduce emotional flare-ups by giving both people a full chance to express their views.
- ◆ Preserve both parties’ self-respect, so that, however the conflict is resolved, neither feels like a loser.

The One Basic Prerequisite of Effective Mediation

The one thing you need before you begin to mediate a conflict is the agreement of both parties that it’s okay for you to be involved.

If one person wants you to help but the other rejects you, your attempt at intervention may do more harm than good.

In informal mediation, agreement doesn’t have to be expressed directly in words. Sometimes, if disputing people listen to you calmly without telling you to butt out, that may be a sign that your intervention is acceptable. But be sensitive to all the signals, both verbal and nonverbal, they are sending you. Back off if you meet too much resistance.

What Exactly Does a Mediator Do?

A mediator’s precise role varies according to the situation. Typically, however, in both formal and informal mediation, the mediator does the following:

- ◆ Meets with the parties both individually and jointly to hear their views.
- ◆ Arranges meetings between the parties in settings that maximize the chances for effective communication: a quiet chat over lunch, for example, as opposed to a highly charged staff meeting with other people involved.
- ◆ Establishes priorities: “First, let’s figure out why you disagreed so much about Project A.”
- ◆ Identifies and clarifies the areas of dispute, so that both parties understand them.
- ◆ Suggests possible solutions and stimulates the parties themselves to suggest others.
- ◆ Helps both parties discuss the merits of the potential solutions.
- ◆ Nudges the parties toward adoption of a mutually acceptable solution.
- ◆ Helps define a clear plan for future action by both parties.



Some Qualities of a Good Mediator

- ◆ Respect for others
- ◆ Impartiality
- ◆ Patience
- ◆ Decisiveness
- ◆ Firmness
- ◆ Analytical mind
- ◆ Creativity
- ◆ Trustworthiness
- ◆ Good communication skills

Twelve Steps to Effective Mediation

When you're called upon to mediate a dispute—or when you discreetly volunteer—the following steps will help you do the most effective job possible:

- Step 1:** Be sure both parties are committed to resolving their problem in good faith.
- Step 2:** Set firm rules for the parties' interactions with each other and with you—for instance, no name-calling.
- Step 3:** In your own behavior, present a model of a rational orientation toward solving the problem. That is, show the disputants a good way to behave.
- Step 4:** Have both parties explain what they think about the problem.
- Step 5:** Encourage both parties to be honest about their feelings.
- Step 6:** State in your own words the issues and emotions involved, and ask both parties to correct you if you've misunderstood. Often, simply by reframing what they have said, you will put the entire conflict in a new light for them.
- Step 7:** Show your respect for each party, but don't be afraid to indicate your own opinions about what they tell you. Although you should begin with an unbiased attitude, you don't have to remain neutral on each individual point.



- Step 8:** Analyze all you've heard to identify possible areas of agreement and overarching goals that both parties might accept.
- Step 9:** Identify some possible solutions to the conflict.
- Step 10:** Explain your analysis and your potential solutions and encourage feedback. Try to get the parties to build on your ideas and come up with potential solutions of their own.
- Step 11:** Help the parties evaluate and choose among all the possible solutions that have been mentioned.
- Step 12:** Frame the chosen solution as a concrete plan of action, and get both parties to commit themselves to it.

You've got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em, know when to walk away, know when to run.

— **KENNY ROGERS**

American singer and songwriter

ACTIVITY 8.3

NAME _____

Using the Twelve Steps

Recall a recent time when you were “caught in the middle” between two disputing friends or coworkers. How might you have used the twelve steps to effective mediation to help the people reach a better resolution of the conflict?

Describe the conflict and how you got caught up in it.

Now take the steps one by one and explain what you could have done:

Step 1 _____

Step 2 _____

Step 3 _____

Step 4 _____

Step 5 _____

Step 6 _____

Step 7 _____

Step 8 _____

Step 9 _____

Step 10 _____

Step 11 _____

Step 12 _____



GETTING CONNECTED

In an effort to reduce school violence, many schools have set up programs in which students serve as mediators for conflicts involving other students.

Using your favorite search engine on the Web, enter the phrase “*peer mediation*” and explore some of the school sites you find.

Do you think this stress on peer mediation in schools bodes well for the future?

Alternatively, try a similar search with the term *family mediation*.

What kinds of organizations do you discover?

What types of people are involved in them? What are their goals?

WORKSHOP WRAP-UP

- If you have good skills for handling your own conflicts, you may be able to serve as a mediator in conflicts between others.
- The advantages of mediation include improved communication between the conflicting parties and the chance to find better solutions.
- Mediation can be formal or informal, and is often informal.
- In mediation, the parties don’t have to agree to any outcome they don’t like.
- A mediator meets with both parties to the conflict, establishes priorities, clarifies the area of dispute, and suggests possible solutions as well as a plan of action for the future.
- The twelve steps to effective mediation include setting firm rules for the discussion, encouraging honesty, and showing respect for both parties.

Checklist for Handling Conflict

- ✓ Conflict occurs when one person's attempt to reach his or her goals interferes with another person's attempt to do the same.
- ✓ Conflict can damage an organization in many ways. But conflict can also improve decision making and stimulate creativity.
- ✓ Conflict can also help an organization by improving decision making and stimulating creativity.
- ✓ Several conditions help make a conflict constructive rather than destructive: for example, seeing the problem as a mutual one with a win-win outcome, expressing ideas openly, and treating others with respect.
- ✓ Defensiveness often prevents us from responding well to advice or criticism.
- ✓ We can improve our response to advice and criticism by setting aside our egos, suspending judgment, and using active listening techniques.
- ✓ By becoming approachable, attentive, and grateful listeners, we can encourage people to come to us with good advice.
- ✓ To help people hear you without undue defensiveness, frame your advice in a way that allows them to preserve their self-esteem.
- ✓ Even when you object to someone's personal behavior, you should focus your comments on specific behavioral changes that might improve the environment for everyone.
- ✓ "I" messages, which avoid accusations and show that the reactions you're stating are your own, can help you frame advice constructively.
- ✓ Before offering advice or criticism, you should prepare in advance so that your remarks are accurate, clear, and delivered at the best time and place.
- ✓ Aggressive behavior promotes one's own opinions, feelings, or rights at the expense of other people's.
- ✓ Assertive behavior, in contrast, stakes one's own claim while respecting the claims of others.
- ✓ Often we misinterpret the extent of another person's aggressiveness, especially when gender or cultural differences are involved.
- ✓ Anger can have severe consequences for relationships, morale, and personal health.
- ✓ The responsibility for anger lies with the person who feels the anger.
- ✓ The extremes of letting anger out and keeping it in can both be harmful. A better way is to try consciously to manage your anger.
- ✓ Practical steps for managing anger include accepting responsibility, clarifying the emotional and factual details, speaking about the matter assertively, and reflecting on the experience afterward.

continued on next page

Checklist for Handling Conflict *continued*

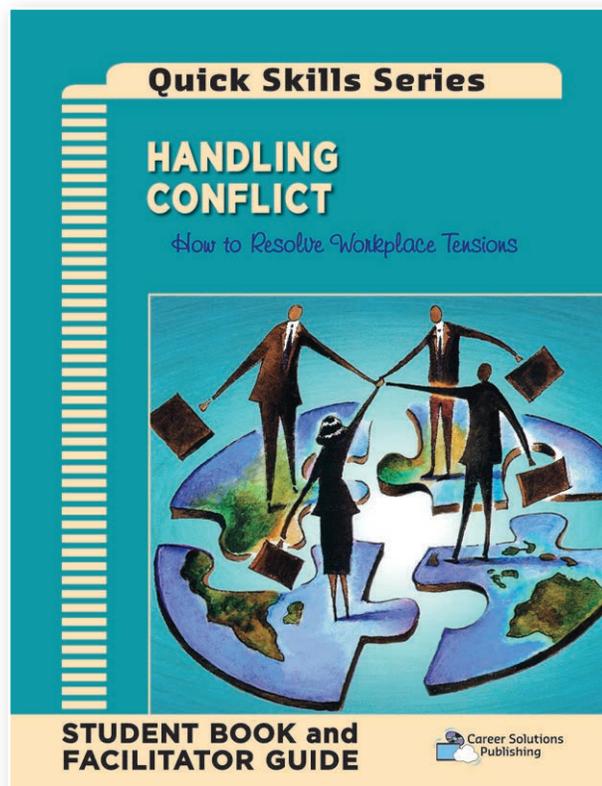
- ✓ You can help reduce the potential for conflict by minimizing distortions of perception and interpretation.
- ✓ Stereotypes foster conflict when they are negative, inflexible, or offensive to others.
- ✓ You can often prevent conflict with simple changes in your behavior, such as avoiding unpleasant topics.
- ✓ The five basic conflict management strategies are avoidance, accommodation, compromise, competition, and collaboration.
- ✓ Collaboration takes the most time and energy, but it is the one true “win-win” strategy.
- ✓ Collaboration depends on defining the problem clearly and looking for goals that both parties share.
- ✓ Even if the other person is very angry, you can make progress toward resolving the conflict if you express your thoughts and feelings in a constructive manner.
- ✓ If you have good skills for handling your own conflicts, you may be able to serve as a mediator in conflicts between others.
- ✓ The advantages of mediation include improved communication between the conflicting parties and the chance to find better solutions.
- ✓ The twelve steps to effective mediation include setting firm rules for the discussion, encouraging honesty, and showing respect for both parties.

Quick Skills Series

A Facilitator's Guide to accompany this book is available for your use as an additional resource.

The Facilitator's Guide may be ordered from Amazon.com.

Facilitator's Guide: ISBN: 978-1-935058-85-4



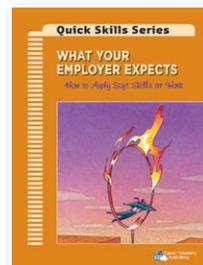
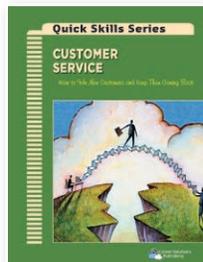
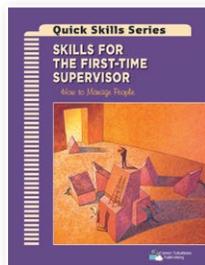
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