

## Kwantlen Counselling Services Present ... **An Introduction to Resolving Conflict**

When we think about conflict, we often feel heavy. We see it as negative. Yet, conflicts are a part of life. As long as we are in relationships, we will have conflicts - they are simply about differences. The question is: how are you going to handle it? Well, you could deny the problem exists, give in and smooth it over or overpower the other person. Generally, these ways don't work very well. However, when you resolve a conflict through compromise and collaboration, then you can achieve a win/win solution. And, your relationships can become stronger.

### **Conflict Resolution in a Nutshell:**

1. State the problem. Use "I" messages to explain how you see the problem. Allow the other person to do the same. This is the time to clearly define the conflict. It's hard to fix something before both of you agree on what's broken.
2. Understand all points of view. In order to defuse tension and defensiveness, set aside your opinions for a moment. Take the time to understand the other person's point of view. Sum up their perspective in words the other person can accept. When people feel they have been heard, they are often more willing to listen. Then share your perspective.
3. Brainstorm solutions. Dream up as many options as you can. Be creative and think outside the box. You could use a flipchart or simply a piece of paper to keep track of the ideas.
4. Evaluate the solutions. Get rid of the ideas that are unacceptable. Talk about which solutions will work and how difficult they will be to implement.
5. Choose the solution. Choose the one that works best for both of you. Be honest.
6. Implement the solution. Decide who is going to do what by when. Keep your agreements.
7. Re-evaluate. Review how well the solution is working and whether it needs changes.

### **Some Strategies to Resolve Conflict**

#### ***Step back from the conflict***

Instead of trading personal attacks, step back and approach the conflict in a neutral way. Reframe the conflict as a problem to be solved, not a contest to be won. You could say, "We have a situation that isn't working well. Please tell me what you think the problem is and how to solve it. Then I'll share my perspective. Let's talk until we find a solution that works for us both."

#### ***Commit to the relationship***

Our most difficult conflicts are often with people we care about most. Begin by affirming your commitment to the other person: "I care about you and I want this relationship to last. So I'm willing to do whatever it takes to resolve this problem." Ask the other person for a commitment.

#### ***Lay your cards on the table***

Say what you observe, think, feel, and intend to do. It's tempting to hold back but this is one way of keeping the conflict alive. Use "I" statements (e.g., "I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when \_\_\_\_\_") and don't worry about saying things perfectly.

### ***Back up to common ground***

Conflict heightens the differences between people. Sometimes, it's helpful to back up and list the points on which you agree: "OK, I know we have different ideas on how much to spend on a new car but we do agree the old one needs to be replaced and it needs to be automatic."

### ***Slow down the communication***

During conflict, the discussion can get heated. People get fired up and talk quickly. Nobody is really listening. When this happens, choose to either listen or talk - not both at the same time. Usually this slows the pace and allows people to become calmer.

### ***Be a complete listener***

Before responding to what the other person says, check to see if you have received their message correctly: "What I'm hearing you say is \_\_\_\_\_. Is that right?" Ask for more: "Is there anything else you want to say about that?" Replace judgment with curiosity.

### ***Get to the point***

Sometimes people in conflict build up to their main points cautiously. Get to your point right away, rather than having the other person getting worried and getting lost in the details.

### ***Ask for forgiveness***

Sometimes conflict arises because of our errors, not because of something we have done intentionally. When we own our mistakes and admit we are not perfect, others may move quickly.

### ***Allow the emotion***

Conflict is messy. It's ok to cry, to be upset, to feel angry. Allowing other people to see the strength of your feelings can help to clear up the conflict.

### ***Agree to disagree***

Sometimes you get all points of view out there and work hard on problem-solving but still the conflict remains. You can still co-exist peacefully with the other person and respect them even though you don't agree on issues. Conflict can be accepted even when it is not resolved.

### ***See the conflict within you***

When you are angry or upset, take a minute to look inside. Maybe you are over-reacting. Maybe unintentionally you did something to create the conflict. Or maybe the other person is simply saying something you know is true and don't want to admit it.

### ***Get help from a Counsellor***

You can make an appointment to see a Kwantlen Counsellor to talk about any difficulties you are having getting along with somebody else. (S)he may help you to clarify the issues involved, gain some understanding of your emotions, and develop skills and confidence in handling conflicts. Consider registering for a Conflict Resolution seminar at the Learning Centre, free of charge.

Suggested Reading: Getting to Yes by Fisher & Ury (1981), Difficult Conversations by Stone, Patton and Heen (1999)