

CONFLICT SOLUTIONS

Fixing Interpersonal Conflict at Work

Expert Advice to Resolve Workplace Discord

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Reframing: A Conflict Resolver's Superpower

At a recent mediation conference, I saw a T-shirt emblazoned with, “My Superpower Is Mediation, What’s Yours?” As you probably know, all superheroes have a few tricks they rely on, such as smashing bad guys, blasting stuff, and, of course, the awesome power of flight. Mediators also have a range of powers, and I believe that “reframing” is our equivalent of flying. Here is how to make it work in your conflict resolution efforts.

When a speaker makes a volatile or destructive statement, you reword (or “reframe”) it to highlight the speaker’s

needs and also defang the initial comment. The technique requires that you first look beyond the original wording to determine the speaker’s actual wants or needs. Next, you recast the statement in a neutral or interest-based way.

As an illustration, one of your employees might say, “Juan is out of control. All he does is spy on me all day—I don’t know how he gets any work done.” Upon hearing this statement, you would use your x-ray vision to determine the underlying want and then boomerang it back. You might say, “Is this about the importance you place on having some privacy and ensuring team productivity?” It is amazing how a

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More About Nancy:

Prior to starting with In-Accord, Nancy served as the Executive Director of Community Mediation Services, a nonprofit located in Vancouver WA that provides conflict resolution services and related training to the community. Nancy is a certified mediator and an approved practicum supervisor with the Washington Mediation Association. She has over ten years’ experience providing professional mediation training and has mentored hundreds of mediators. A mediator since 1996, Nancy has resolved many types of cases including workplace, neighbor-to-neighbor, small claims, landlord/tenant, victim-offender, foreclosure, and police/citizen matters. She is a large group facilitator and has led sessions for numerous internal workgroups, retreats, and public meetings. She designs and presents mediator training, conflict resolution, decision-making and communications trainings. Nancy earned a B.A. from Eastern Michigan University and a J.D. from Loyola University of Chicago School of Law. Nancy was a member of the Rotary Group Study Exchange Team to Indonesia.

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Perspective:



Every atom in your body is
BILLIONS
of years old.

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simple reframe like this can redirect the entire conversation. Instead of debating whether Juan is spying and slacking off, the conversation transforms into a meaningful discussion about expectations for workspace privacy and improving productivity.

A skillful reframe will redirect the conversation from a fixation on the negative (e.g., “I don’t want this” or “I don’t like that”) to reveal what the speaker does want. Leading people into a discussion about their wants and needs is always more beneficial than allowing them to wallow in what irks them. As an added benefit, reframing helps all parties in the conflict to accept more neutral and problem-solving perspectives.

A few tips when using this power:

- Do not assume you know the speaker’s real need. Simply test your theory by phrasing your reframe as a question.
- If your hypothesis is incorrect, the speaker will tell you. (For example, “No, it’s not about privacy. It’s about respecting boundaries.”) This is still productive because the conversation has shifted onto a more constructive path.

- Try not to use this technique too soon. Remember to use your full range of active listening skills. You have to earn trust before people allow you to reframe their statements.
- Be conservative with it. This power can begin to feel disingenuous to the speaker if it is overused.
- Reframing does not mean that you should edit out the emotional content. People feel heard when their feelings are acknowledged. You can always preface the reframe with an acknowledgment of their emotions. Even a simple “This is really upsetting for you...” can be effective.

Give it a try. What do these speakers really want?

- “I do my part, but other people on the team aren’t pitching in and giving this project the attention it deserves.”
- “When push comes to shove, we just need to get this done and get on with things. We shouldn’t process every decision to death.”
- “Everyone else in this department is excluding me because I’m a newcomer. All of these cliques make it feel like being in school again.”

Try using the reframing technique in your resolution efforts at work. Even though you are unable to fly, your new power will still help you save a piece of the world from destruction, just like a superhero.

Don’t avoid it: We’ll help you face organizational challenges.



Client quote:

“In-Accord swooped in and worked with a team in need. Valuable lessons were imparted and the team expressed much gratitude for the guidance and knowledge gained.”

-Andrew Sanis RN, Manager ITS, Asante