

CONFLICT SOLUTIONS

Fixing Interpersonal Conflict at Work

Expert Advice to Resolve Workplace Discord

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Golden Nuggets that Solve Conflict

As workplace conflicts deteriorate, they oscillate between icy avoidance and open argument. By the time leaders get involved, the situation may appear irreparable. In a recent In-Accord case, dynamics among three managers initially appeared to be irreversible. This team had been through an anxiety-producing reorganization and members blamed each other for many difficulties. The managers privately explained their perspectives:

- “Chuck advocates for his department with no regard for the bigger picture.”
- “Henry insulted me.”
- “I don’t trust Juanita and I won’t meet with her alone anymore.”

You’d expect to hear such sentiments during fierce conflict. However, woven into the negative narratives were subtle but positive points:

- “I’m not perfect, and there are things I could do differently.”
- “I’m motivated to work this out.”
- “We had some great collaborative moments before the reorganization.”

Positive comments emerge in most cases I’ve assessed for potential resolution work. Here’s how to capitalize on these nuggets:

1) Eyes and ears open. During a deluge of complaints, it’s natural to become swamped and neglect the quieter, more productive thoughts. Listen, record, and highlight these ideas for integration into the resolution effort. These gold fragments will be more useful than the complaints. It’s hard to see the precious metals among the rocks if you don’t look.

2) Pan for gold. You can elicit constructive nuggets by asking questions that encourage them. Once you establish trust and the speaker’s story has been shared, you might ask, “What was it like when you first worked together?” or “What would you like to learn from this experience?” or “How would you feel about Henry if you didn’t work together?” Questions that elicit positive replies unearth valuable treasures.

3) Spend the wealth. When a conflict spirals, all sides believe the worst about each other and the best of themselves. If you’ve gathered...

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Help for Your Team

When you have a small, mission critical group experiencing conflict.

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...helpful statements (e.g. recognition of the other's excellent technical skills; a core belief that Person X isn't intentionally malicious; recognition of one's own culpability), put these points back into circulation.

At the negotiation table, you can reflect back the positives people shared when speaking individually. This is particularly potent because people inevitably focus on the negative, but you—the resolver—can focus on positives. This holds true in face-to-face meetings between conflicted parties. You can take breaks to talk with each side and remind them of their original (and more constructive) observations. In the example above, you might say, "Juanita, earlier you said you understand how your assertive style might turn Chuck off, but you haven't said anything like that to him today." Spend the wealth during the resolution process.

Conclusion

Mangled working relationships may appear frayed beyond repair. Yet even people mired in disputes mention upsides about others and are often self-aware of their behavior. These insights provide hope if you use them to remind people about the possibility and benefits of resolution. Your resolution task is enhanced if you shift attention from the broken rubble to the valuable gold sprinkled throughout the conflict. Good luck prospecting.

Speeches & Workshops

I. Portland Project Management Institute

"Conflict Courage: Leading to Resolution"

Date: 2/20/2018 **Time:** 4:00pm-8:00pm

Place: DoubleTree Hotel, 1000 NE Multnomah St, Portland OR

II. Oregon Health Care Association

"Fixing Workplace Conflict"

Date: 3/1/2018 **Time:** 3:00pm-4:30pm

Place: Hilton Hotel, Eugene

Perspective

Alpha Centauri,
closest star to the sun,
is 25 trillion miles away.