

Communication and Conflict Resolution Assumptions, Perceptions and Inquiry

“To effectively communicate, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others.”

-Anthony Robbins

As we all know, conflicts are difficult and uncomfortable situations to deal with. A conflict is a dispute or disagreement between two or more people. Conflicts are produced when the needs and interests of two parties are perceived to be at odds over specific issues. Both parties feel threatened by the other. They occur in all aspects of our world, in the workplace among colleagues and co-workers, clients, and at home with family members, and friends. Every evening on the world news programs conflicts between political parties, governments and world religions are ever present and difficult to resolve.

Communication is the key to resolving conflict. Let's examine the elements of communication, its routine difficulties and how these difficulties contribute to conflicts that demand our intervention for resolution.

How many times have we made an assumption which turned out to be totally wrong? An **assumption** is a statement or judgment that is presumed to be true without concrete evidence to support it. How often do we query a situation to gain additional information? An **inquiry** is any process that has the aim of augmenting knowledge, resolving doubt, or solving a problem. Resolving a conflict depends on the ability to come to a rational and well informed understanding of the situation. This may come about by questioning our perceptions of the situation, our assumptions and through inquiry.

As has been previously discussed, **perception** is the process of attaining awareness or the understanding of sensory information. Our responses to difficult situations and people are the result of how we view the world, based on our perceptions and our assumptions. This view may not necessarily be accurate but, nonetheless, it forms our **opinion**.

We utilize a number of different skills when we interpret situations and others. Both verbal and non-verbal cues provide context in forming our perceptions and assumptions. Non-verbal cues include in part, written, visual, tone of voice, and body language. (NOTE: Email should NEVER be used as a tool for conflict resolution). We interpret each other's intentions and believe our opinion to be correct when it may be very far from the truth.

According to *Guy Harris, Certified Human Behavior Specialist*, conflict can create a perceived threat and as a result, we experience a rush of adrenaline that decreases our ability to communicate clearly. With that in mind here are some of his recommendations to improve your communication and assist you in resolving conflict:

1. **Focus on behaviors and not your interpretations.** As you communicate with other people, focus on and speak to their behaviors more than you speak to your assumptions about their behaviors. Ask yourself, what is their intent? How might they characterize their behavior?
2. **Stay curious, use inquiry.** Often time conflict occurs due to a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of information. Ask for clarification, research the issue, and repeat what you think was said. This active curiosity will allow you to clarify assumptions and uncover the problem instead of judging or attacking the person. Look for alternative explanations for the person's behavior for the situation.
3. **Use "I" Statements.** I statements are non-threatening statements indicating how a certain situation makes you feel. For example, if someone is speaking loudly an I statement would be "When you speak loudly, I feel like you are angry with me." Rather than, "Why are you so angry?" It takes some practice but it is very effective.
4. **Say what you want rather than what you don't want.** If you are interested in having someone change their behavior towards you tell them what you would like to see rather than what you don't want to see.
5. **Be aware of your non-verbal messages.** Remember that the other person will respond negatively to anything you do that they might perceive negatively (being dismissive, disrespectful, condescending, or threatening). Maintain steady eye-contact, relaxed posture, use a calm voice and your communication during conflict will improve.
6. **Give them a chance to speak.** Remember this, people don't need to get their way so much as they **need to be heard and understood**. If you will slow down long enough to really listen, they will most likely calm down enough to listen to you. When people get a chance to say what is on their mind it helps to lower emotional energy and create a pathway for a more productive dialogue.
7. **Apologize for your contribution.** Conflicts rarely happen entirely due to one person's actions. You most likely did something to frustrate the other person prior to or just after the conflict began, if only unintentionally. Apologize. An apology will probably improve your status with the other person.

Conflict resolution can be effectively managed by each of us with the application of the above described elements to improve our daily communications with our loved ones, our families, our co-workers and colleagues and clients. Conflicts will occur when interactions involve misconceptions, poor assumptions, incomplete information or inaccurate perceptions. The accompanying loss of productive business energy and time and the costly lack of cooperative and collaborative effort in our professional and personal lives can be minimized with attention to these elements.

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