

UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT - HANDOUT 2

KEYS TO DE-ESCALATING CONFLICT

To turn conflict around and contribute to its resolution, it is important that we address emotions first (creating an environment where individuals can calm themselves down) by resorting to active and reflective listening and watching out for high-risk responses. Once this is done, focus can be shifted to manage the actual issue. Starting with addressing the issue first while forgetting to manage emotions is quite difficult since problem solving usually requires people to act from a calm and resourceful state.

Address Emotions First

It is natural and frequent that conflict situations result in loaded emotions such as anger. As previously highlighted in M1 - Emotional Intelligence, suppressing emotions is unhealthy and counterproductive. Learning to constructively deal with the feelings associated with conflict as well as the situation itself is essential to resonant and productive interactions. In fact, when our thoughts and feelings are in balance, we are in a resourceful state. On the other hand, when feelings dominate and thinking is unclear, we switch to a non-resourceful state where miscommunication and conflict escalation are bound to happen.

While the parties involved in the conflict can contribute to the conditions which trigger anger, the way we handle and express our emotions is a choice that we are personally responsible for, even if it feels at times as if we have no control.

A helpful and simple technique to address the emotions and manage anger is the H.E.A.T. model which offers four sequential steps that consist of the following:

- H - Hearing the person out by listening actively
- E - Empathizing and acknowledging what you have heard
- A - Asking questions to clarify your understanding
- T - Taking action, do something to move the problem forward

Listening Skills for De-escalating conflict

Reflective and active listening play a wide role in interpersonal relationships and especially in de-escalating conflict. (Rautalinko and Lisper, 2005). In conflict situations, these listening skills:

- Bring emotion down
- Let the listener know their message was heard
- Aid in clearing up confusion
- Build understanding between both parties
- Open a space for the next step: problem solving

Example: *“You feel angry about your colleague calling you lazy. Is that right?”*

Refer to the worksheet on Listening in the Practices and Exercises Sections.

When the listener focuses on the speaker to understand both emotion and content and “reflects” what the speaker felt and said, he opens an opportunity for the party involved in the conflict to be heard and acknowledged.

Intentional and active listening also minimizes high risk responses and limits the frequent temptation to offer solutions/evaluations or withdraw from the situation (Katz and Lawyer).

Minimizing high-risk responses

When working to de-escalate conflict, it helps to be aware of and avoid certain high-risk responses which may:

- derail the conversation.
- take the focus off the speaker.
- block the speaker from finding a solution.
- lower the speaker’s self-esteem.
- distance the listener from the speaker.
- diminish the speaker’s motivation.

Examples of high-risk responses include:

<p>Sending Solutions by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ordering - Threatening - Moralizing (what’s right) - Advising - Using logical arguments - Questioning <p><u>Underlying message:</u> “I don’t believe you are able to work on your problem without my help.”</p>	<p>Evaluating:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Judging - Praising - Focusing on what’s wrong - Name-calling <p><u>Underlying message:</u> “I will tell you what I think, rather than help you understand what you think.”</p>	<p>Withdrawing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reassuring - Changing the topic - Using excessive emotions <p><u>Underlying message:</u> “I’m uncomfortable with your feelings and I don’t know how to deal with what you’re talking about.”</p>
<p>Discussion: Which of the above patterns do you tend to engage in that may be affecting others? What patterns do you notice others engaging in that affect you?</p>		