

Administrative Assistant's

UPDATE



PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR CANADA'S OFFICE SUPPORT STAFF

MAY 2006

Dealing with conflict

With the right intentions, you can have a courageous conversation

Everyone has had a negative experience with conflict at some time. We've said what we really thought and then had someone attack or reject us because of it. Naturally, then, most of us have become afraid of confrontation.

But expressing our thoughts and feelings does not have to be confrontational. Openness and honesty can establish communication and build relationships. The more you share your feelings with someone, the closer you become.

Fear of loss of security

The reason we do not deal with conflict is because we are *afraid*. We are afraid people will not like us, will not speak to us, that we will be attacked or we will not be loved, that we will be rejected and lonely, that we will lose our job or that we will lose face. Underneath every one of our fears is the fear of a *loss of security* and because our drive to survive requires that we earn a living, we protect our security by avoiding confrontation.

To avoid confrontation, we convince ourselves that saying nothing is safest, even if we are very upset or angry. We think that by avoiding conflict we can avoid pain and the losses we fear.

This may be true, but only in the short term. The short-term gain (avoiding conflict) often leads to long-term pain (harbouring painful feelings towards another person, maybe even for years).

When people face conflict

People will only attempt to resolve conflict if it is safe to do so or if they are compelled to do so. In other words, if we know that there will be no repercussions, we will be more inclined to say what we



ASK AN EXPERT

Maureen Fitzgerald

really think. Or, if we believe the situation is going to get worse than it is, we may feel forced to address the conflict.

A courageous conversation

Addressing conflict requires you to have a *courageous conversation* with the other person.

Before you have your courageous conversation, ask yourself a few questions.

Aim. What is your intent – what do you want to achieve? This is the most important question. (If you are clear about what you ultimately want to achieve, the other questions will often answer themselves.) For example, do you want to have a respectful and healthy relationship with the other person? Or do you want to make the other person feel bad? Are your intentions constructive or destructive?

Content. What do you want to say? You will likely have many things to say, and some will be more important than others. Write down your many messages, select a few and then check them for intent.

Form. In what way will you say it? Face-to-face and in a confidential arena is the best approach for a courageous conversation.

Timing. When do you want to have your conversation? Timing

can make or break it. Neither person should be highly emotional or strained. Early-morning conversations are best, before the day gets hectic and energy depleted.

Tone. How will you say it? This is where most people slip up. They think they are speaking in a kind way when they are not.

As a conflict resolution professional, I use the following model to help people structure their conversations in a way that is the most helpful and effective.

- Describe the behaviour you are reacting to, using *I* statements. (“I saw you having lunch with my old boss yesterday.”) Stick to facts rather than opinions.
- Describe how the behaviour made you feel or affected you. Do not blame or jump to conclusions. (“It made me feel concerned because I had confided in you about my feelings about him.”)
- Describe your need to allow for this event to be prevented in the future. (“I need to know that what I say to you stays with you.”)

It is useful to write out these three steps and your responses and even read them to a helper. With a bit of practice, you can use this three-step method to help you resolve all sorts of differences in your work and other relationships. **MAU**

Maureen Fitzgerald, PhD, is a lawyer and expert in conflict and collaboration. She is the author of six books including *Corporate Circles*. Her company, CenterPoint – Conflict & Collaboration Inc. is dedicated to resolving conflict and building trusting teams. Visit www.CenterPointInc.com.