

Conflict Resolution ----> Learning Conversations

5 Key Points

I. The problem is often the difference between two stories. Neither story is the right one, or the truth.

Who's Right	<i>Share different stories, perceptions, interpretations and values. Redefine the problem as simply the difference between the stories.</i>	Right
Who's Wrong		Left

II. We assume negative intent or negative character.

- We make attributions about another person's intentions based on the impact of their actions on us. We feel hurt: therefore they intended to hurt us.
- We assume the worst. The conclusions we draw about intentions based on the impact of others' actions on us are rarely charitable.
- We treat ourselves more charitably. You - you're stressed. Them in the same situation – they're irresponsible.
- We assume bad intentions mean bad character. The person is the problem.
- Accusing them of bad intentions creates defensiveness. We think we are sharing our hurt, frustration, anger, or confusion. They think we are trying to provoke, accuse, or malign them. Both parties think they are the victim, and both think they are acting only to defend themselves.
- Attributions can become self-fulfilling. Our assumptions often come true.
- We assume that because we had good intentions, the other person should not feel offended.
- When we only focus on clarifying our intentions, we often miss what the other person is trying to say. When someone says, "Why were you trying to offend me?" they are communicating two messages: 1) "I know what you intended." 2) "I was offended." When we are accused we usually only focus on the first message and not the second because we feel the need to defend ourselves.
- When someone says "You intended to offend me", they often mean " You don't care enough about me."
- It is useful to clarify our intentions. However, be aware that some times are better than others for doing this. The beginning of the conversation is usually NOT one of them because we may not fully understand what the other person is trying to express.

- Intentions are more complex than just “good” or “bad.” Intentions are often mixed. Even if our intentions turn out not to be altruistic, the fact that we have spent time thinking about and correctly communicating your intentions sends a positive message to the recipient. We only do this kind of hard work for someone who matters to us.

III. Move from assigning blame to mapping out the contributions of each person.

Each person has contributed to the problem in some way. In our own heads, who’s to blame seems pretty clear: usually the *other* person!

Instead of blaming we need to focus on our contribution to the conflict as well as the other person’s. At the heart, blame is about judging and contribution is about understanding. Blame is about judging and looks backward. Contribution is about understanding and looks forward. When blame is the goal, understanding is lost.

Two tools for determining our contributions to a conflict:

- Put yourself in the other person’s shoes. What would they say I’m contributing to the conflict?
- Look at the problem from the perspective of a disinterested observer.

IV. Acknowledge and express our feelings.

Unexpressed feelings often leak into the conversation, making it difficult to listen. Find the feelings lurking under attributions, judgments and accusations. We Translate our feelings into:

Judgments: If you were a good friend you would have been there for me.

Attributions: Why were you trying to hurt me?

Characterization: You’re just so inconsiderate.

Problem-Solving: The answer is for you to call me more often.

Beware of thinking that feelings are the gospel. Feelings aren’t static. They change as we shift the meaning of events and stories. Feelings are formed in response to our thoughts. The route to changing our feelings is through altering our thinking. Examine your own story, what are you telling yourself that gives rise to how you feel? Ask yourself, what might the other person’s story be? Almost always, an increased awareness of the other person’s story changes how we feel.

V. Recognize that conflict can be a threat to our sense of who we are.

The shift we need to make is to identify and own what the conflict is saying about us that we might not like. Conflict may lead us to question: “Am I competent? Am I a good person? Am I worthy of respect?” In identifying and owning what the conflict is saying about us we can transcend our defensiveness and separate out our personal issues from our professional interactions and work.

Note: The above principals are derived from the book *Difficult Conversations*, by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project. Published by Viking in 1999.

Conflict Skills Worksheet
Section I

Reflection Process

Fill out this section on your own to prepare for a learning conversation.

I. The problem is often the difference between two stories. Neither story is the right one, or the truth.

What's my story about what happened?

II. We assume negative intent or negative character.

In my eyes, what are/were the other person's intentions?

What impact did/does that person's actions have on me?

III. Move from assigning blame to mapping out the contributions of each person.

Who's to blame for this conflict? Who's to blame for what? Why?

What is my contribution to the conflict? What do I see as their contribution to the conflict?

IV. Acknowledge and express our feelings.

What feelings do I have as a result of this conflict? Explain.

Caring, close, proud, passionate, anger, frustrated, exasperated, enraged, indignant, hurt, let down, betrayed, disappointed, needy, shame, embarrassed, guilty, regretful, humiliated, self-loathing, fear, anxious, terrified, worried, obsessed, suspicious, self doubt, inadequate, unworthy, inept, unmotivated, joy, happy, enthusiastic, full, elated, content, sad, bereft, wistful, joyless, depressed, jealous, envious, selfish, covetous, anguished, yearning, grateful, appreciative, thankful, relieved, admiring, lonely, desolate, abandoned, empty, longing...

V. Recognize that conflict can be a threat to our sense of who we are.

What might this conflict reveal about who I am that I don't like?

Conflict Skills Worksheet
Section II

Interaction Process Tip Sheet

Questions to guide you during a learning conversation.

I. The problem is often the difference between two stories. Neither story is the right one, or the truth.

What's the other person's story?

What are the main differences between my story and their story?

II. We assume negative intent or negative character.

In their words, what were their actual intentions?

III. Move from assigning blame to mapping out the contributions of each person.

What is my contribution to the conflict?

What is their contribution to the conflict?

IV. Acknowledge and express our feelings.

What feelings underlie my attributions and judgments? Have I shared my feelings? If not, do so.

What feelings underlie their attributions and judgments? Have they shared their feelings? If not, do so.

V. Recognize that conflict can be a threat to our sense of who we are.

What identity issues surface for me? How does what happened threaten my identity?

What identity issues surface for them? How does what happened threaten their identity?