

By Phillip B. Wilson

We Can Work It Out

A manager-led, structured conversation between the two parties, with ground rules, is an effective model for resolving conflict.

Conflict is inevitable wherever people work together. At some point, disagreements will arise, creating frustration and tension. Sometimes it is an issue of a clash of personalities, but more often it is a clash of perceptions. As common as these incidents of conflict are, it is surprising how poorly we typically handle them.

Resolving conflict is a core responsibility for anyone who manages people. The key to effective conflict resolution is to realize that the only people who can solve the problem are those who are in conflict. An effective model for resolving conflict is a facilitated, structured conversation between the two parties. Expectations and ground rules must be set and adhered to, and the environment must be properly controlled.

Seek a conference room or training room (neutral ground that is not your office) — any place where you won't be interrupted and there are no distractions. Three chairs should be set up in a triangle, with the two parties facing each other, and you (the facilitator) between them and a bit to the side. You are like a referee.

Set the expectations and clarify your role at the outset: "I can't fix your problem. I can be a resource to help you work through this. The only people who are going to be

able to resolve this conflict are the two of you. I'm here to help."

Next, set the ground rules for the discussion. Here is a quick outline:

- To use legal terminology, the "plaintiff" will have the opportunity to state his or her side of the story, without interruption.
- You will summarize, making sure the speaker (the plaintiff) agrees with your summary.
- The "defendant" will then have his or her chance, and again you will summarize.
- Once both stories have been told, you will then assume the role of a confidant by asking solution-focused questions.
- Get the parties to agree to a solution.

The most important aspect of this process is to focus on facts and specific behaviors, not judgments about those behaviors. For example, plaintiff Sally might say, "Jim is a jerk!" That is a conclusion about a series of behaviors — a judgment, not a fact. Keep the focus on what behaviors are actually observed. For example, Sally might say that Jim constantly interrupts her and that he rolls his eyes when she makes suggestions. These are all observable behaviors — facts.

Don't Take Sides

Make sure you remain neutral. As soon as you take a side, you

have sabotaged the process. Don't allow interruptions. When you hear a judgment being made, stop the speaker and ask for a description of the behavior that led to the judgment. For example, "Sally, I understand you feel that Jim is acting like a jerk. What exactly is it he's done that led you to that conclusion?"

Once you have heard both stories, and have summarized each of them in turn, the real work begins. Again, your job is not to fix the problem. Your job is to help the two parties arrive at a solution together. Solution-focused questions are the key to this part of the process.

There are powerful questions that are going to get the parties working toward a solution, such as: "What resources do you have that could prevent this from happening again? Are there things that are happening at other times where this works, and is there anything we can learn from that situation we can apply to this situation? What do you think would be a good solution to this issue?" Once a solution has been agreed to, set a time to revisit the issue. Allow enough time to test the solution.

Overall, this process is applicable in a variety of settings with many different personalities and a wide range of problems. **ISM**

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