

Understanding Conflict and Disagreement

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Have you ever wondered why some people seem to like to disagree? Why do some simple disagreements turn into major conflicts that can damage relationships? We all know of some families in which a little disagreement caused family members to divide and not speak for years. Why does this happen and how can a person learn to communicate within disagreements and not allow the disagreement to escalate into conflict?

This lesson should help participants understand the difference between conflict and disagreement. It will review what causes conflict and disagreement. You will understand that disagreement can be healthy and productive, why you should avoid conflict at any cost, and how to communicate effectively within disagreements and conflicts. You also will take a look at your tolerance for disagreement and how to know your tolerance level and the subjects to avoid.

To better understand the difference between disagreement and conflict, let us examine the two behaviors.

Disagreement is a difference of opinion. It is based upon one's personal orientation system, including values, needs, interests, or intentions. Disagreement should be seen as functional and/or positive. To disagree is natural. How strongly one feels about something is directly related to one's tolerance for disagreement. We all have opinions and ways of doing things. As long as our tolerance level is not overstressed, we often communicate no verbal disagreement and very little nonverbal disagreement.

Conflict is a strong disagreement or collision of values, needs, interests, or intentions among individuals, groups, organizations, communities, or

nations. Conflict is different than disagreement because of its negative effect (dislike of person or organization). Conflict requires the following: opposing interests, recognition of parties, beliefs of parties, and interaction (communication). Conflict is seen as dysfunctional, unhealthy competition, loss of affinity, hostility, suspicion, and distrust. Conflict occurs when basic needs are not met, or when an individual or group is perceived to be obstructing an individual's or group's attaining of certain goals. Conflicts often involve struggles over allocation and use of resources and power.

How many persons does it take to have the perception of conflict in a relationship?

Products of disagreement

New ideas, better ways of doing things, change, innovations, better use of resources, new skills.

Products of conflict

- ◆ Conflict is negative and any outcome/product would be negative, not positive.
- ◆ Conflict is the exclusive product of communication.
- ◆ The more conflict there is, the harder it is to manage.
- ◆ Try to get conflict under control quickly.
- ◆ You can control disagreement; you cannot control conflict.
- ◆ Only way to control conflict is to stop all communication. This includes verbal and nonverbal communication. Staying in the same room or within sight of individual causing the perceived or actual conflict will not work. Get out of sight!

Tolerance for disagreement is an important skill to learn. Learning other people's level of tolerance for

disagreement and what level a person can handle without the disagreement going into conflict is a key factor in conflict communication.

Tolerance for Disagreement Chart

- _____ I usually find it productive to smooth over the other person's feelings when I am involved in a disagreement; I do not get upset or make waves.
- _____ For me, a disagreement situation is a real challenge. Since there is usually one who is right and one who is wrong, I don't want to be wrong so I'll make my point.
- _____ In a disagreement situation, I usually sit down and try to work out the disagreement. I am usually as interested in what the other person wants as with what I want. I am not concerned about who gets their way, but I want so see that the disagreement does not hurt the relationship.
- _____ When disagreements occur, both sides have to be prepared to give a little. I usually don't like confrontation and really feel that "half a loaf" is better than none.
- _____ I don't like hostility and tension that result from disagreements. I try to avoid disagreements entirely and not deal with confrontation and disputes.

Communication within disagreements is a learned skill. It is important to control your verbal and nonverbal communication. Watch the tone, pitch, speed, and volume of your voice and learn to control your nonverbal communications—gestures, hand motions, facial expressions, and personal space. In other words don't get in someone's face. Respect the space around him/her. We all listen in different ways and apply our own interpretation of another person's message.

Learn to use the "I Messages"

- ◆ I feel.....(state your feelings or emotion).
- ◆ When you.....(state the specific behavior).
- ◆ Because.....(describe the effect the behavior has on you).
- ◆ I would like.....(describe the change you'd like).

A friend has borrowed things from you two or three times recently and neglected to return them as promised.

I feel _____
When you _____
Because _____
I would like _____

Conclusion It is okay to disagree. In fact, disagreement is good when we use disagreement to obtain new or better ideas. If everyone thinks the same way, we run the risk of group thinking. That is when everyone appears to have the same opinion or to be thinking alike. When we can disagree and clearly explain our ideas without becoming personally involved, we can have a positive impact in the communication process. When we disagree, we are more likely to engage in critical thinking and usually are more satisfied with the decision we make.

It is best to stop before disagreement turns to conflict. Conflict destroys the cohesion within a relationship or organization and destroys the "we" idea that is the key to successful communication.

References

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