

# 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. Participants will understand that disagreement can be healthy and productive, why conflict should be avoided at any cost, and how to communicate effectively within disagreements and conflicts. They also will take a look at their tolerance for disagreement and how to know their tolerance level and the subjects they should avoid.

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

## Disagreement

**Disagreement** is a difference of opinion. It is based upon one's personal orientation system, including values, needs, interests, and intentions. Disagreement should be seen as functional and/or positive. We normally disagree in two ways: **subjective or procedural**—in other words, based on our opinion about how something should be done or the best method of doing something. 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. Reaction may vary from a raised eyebrow, frown, or small change in facial expression to disagreeing with full facial expressions, body language, and verbal expression ("I most certainly do not agree with....").

## Conflict

**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.

When people are competing to win or trying to coerce an "adversary" into submission, conflicts are often intense and protracted. In conflicts, people bring deeply held emotions and opinions to the situation even though those emotions and opinions may not be expressed verbally. Conflicts within a diverse population are more frequent when people have a low tolerance for disagreement based on beliefs, values, and cultural differences. Some causes of **conflict** are competition, revenge, attri-

bution or response to one's behavior, and faulty communication. Conflict is the direct product of communication.

How many persons does it take to have the perception of conflict in a relationship? **One.** It takes only one individual believing that conflict exists to cause problems. We all know some individuals who seem to like disagreements; they take the opposite road for reasons only they can appreciate. However, these people can cause a lot of problems and discomfort to people and organizations. They are especially troublesome for those individuals whose tendency to avoid disagreement and conflict is great. Some people who are quite uncomfortable with any form of disagreement will avoid any verbal or nonverbal expression, sometimes at great discomfort to themselves.

*Review with club members some positive outcomes/products of disagreement.*

#### **The following can be products of disagreement:**

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

*Have members list any outcomes/products conflict produces.*

#### **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!

Understanding one's level of **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.

**Review Tolerance for Disagreement Chart with participants.** Ask each member to select his/her first and second styles of coping with disagreement.

\_\_\_\_\_ 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.

#### **Conflict Avoidance and Management:**

- ◆ **Avoid Bulldozing** — trying to run over and intimidate the other person by accusing, shouting, name-calling, swearing, threats, taunting, and other kinds of aggressive behavior.
- ◆ **Avoid Grave-Digging** — bringing up past failures or wrongdoing during a current disagreement instead of focusing on the problem at hand.

- ◆ **Avoid Global Statements** — using general words like “always,” “never,” and “every time” instead of being specific. Global statements usually start with the word “You.”
- ◆ **Avoid Character Assassination** — attacking the other person’s personality or character instead of dealing with the problem behavior and trying to solve it. It may include finding the other person’s weakest points and attacking them.
- ◆ **Avoid Wishy-Washy Words** — speaking in vague terms, so no one knows what the problem is. This is the opposite of saying what’s wrong — the other person is supposed to guess. This behavior often goes with sulking and pouting.
- ◆ **Avoid Counterattack** — instead of listening to the other person’s point of view, you think of the person’s own complaint to throw back at him/her. There’s no communication—just verbal attacks.
- ◆ **Avoid Above It All** — acting like you’re above all this. You don’t listen or try to solve the problem. It would be beneath you to deal with this petty problem.

**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).

Have club members practice the “I messages” with the following scenario.

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 \_\_\_\_\_

**Walls and Bridges of Communication**

*A story of two farmers*

Once upon a time there were two men who lived on adjoining farms separated only by a small stream. These men had grown up together, and they farmed the land their fathers had farmed.

They were close and good friends, helping each other during haying and harvest. In the winter they’d spend long hours together amusing themselves with cards or checkers or simply passing the time in friendly talk.

Then one day they argued about ownership of a calf. Each determined he was right. The disagreement led to bitter words, to accusations, to conflict, and to a break in their friendship.

They lived on beside each other, separated only by the gentle stream. But they no longer spoke, nor enjoyed the help they had earlier given to each other, nor the friendship they’d known.

One day a carpenter who was passing through asked one of the farmers if there was some work that needed to be done. Yes, there was. The farmer wanted a wall built along the stream. Then he would be plainly separated from his former friend.

The carpenter worked each day with his tools and lumber while the farmer attended to matters in others parts of his land. When the carpenter said he was finished, the farmer walked down to the stream to see the wall.

But as he approached he was surprised to see the carpenter had not built a wall. Instead he built a bridge across the stream. The farmer was annoyed and angry. As he stood looking at the bridge and wondering what to do, the neighbor came striding across the bridge, his arms out-stretched and shouting. “I’m so glad you built the bridge. I’ve

been wanting to come and talk with you. I want us to be friends again.”

And so because of the carpenter and the bridge, the two men lived again in friendship.

### **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 are usually 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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