Skills for Resolving Conflicts and Dealing with Difficult People

I. ‘Conflict Resolution 101’
II. Crucial Conversations
III. A Step-by-Step Framework
IV. Dealing with Upset Customers
V. De-escalation Techniques

I. “Conflict Resolution 101”:

What is a workplace conflict?

“A condition between or among workers whose jobs are interdependent, who feel angry, who perceive the other(s) as being at fault, and who act in ways that cause a business problem”

(Dana, Conflict Resolution, McGraw-Hill, 2001)
What causes conflicts?

*Needs are not being met!*

- To feel valued, important, appreciated
- Attention, affection
- Freedom, control, power
- Safety, security
- Fairness
- Belonging, friendship, social connections

- Fun, rest, and relaxation
- Creativity; To use one’s intellect and talents
- Self-worth; Doing something personally meaningful

Common Sources of Workplace Conflicts...

- Poor communication; Misunderstandings
- Different values and backgrounds
- Personality clashes
- Power plays and manipulation
- We’re human 😊

- Scarce resources
- Work overload and/or ‘underload’
- Acceptance of poor performance
- Organizational change
- Competition between shifts or departments

What are the costs of unresolved workplace conflicts?

- Wasted time/productivity due to gossip, upset employees, poor morale, absenteeism, and stress-related illnesses
- Reduced quality of work; Regulations compliance declines
- Customers suffer, and organizational reputation suffers

- Loss of employees and the cost to replace them
- Unnecessary restructuring
- Sabotage, theft, damage
- Health costs
- Legal costs
- Destroyed relationships
One study of 1600 employees found that...

- 22% said they had decreased their work efforts as a result of conflict
- Over 50% reported that they had lost work time because they worried about whether the instigator of the conflict would do it again
- 12% reported that they had changed jobs to get away from the instigator

(Cloke & Goldsmith, Resolving Conflicts at Work, Jossey-Bass, 2011)

Fill in the Blank—
American Management Association Survey

- 116 CEO’s
- 76 vice presidents
- 66 middle managers
- Spend at least ____% of their time resolving employee conflicts

(Cloke & Goldsmith, Resolving Conflicts at Work, Jossey-Bass, 2011)

Consider the Time Managers Spend...

- Listening to complaints
- Countering rumors
- Delivering corrective feedback and disciplining employees
- Monitoring compliance with corrective actions
- Searching for solutions

“Managerial time dedicated to resolving conflicts easily increases to 50% or higher.”

(Cloke & Goldsmith, Resolving Conflicts at Work, Jossey-Bass, 2011)
Recent Research on “Toxic Employees”
(Kusy & Holloway, Toxic Workplace: Managing Toxic Personalities & Their Systems of Power, 2009)

- 23 million Americans will experience workplace bullying during their lifetime (Kohut, Understanding, Controlling, and Stopping Bullies..., 2008)
- 94% of employees say they have worked with someone toxic at some point in their career
- 64% are currently working with a toxic person
- __% of nurses say they have experienced verbal abuse on the job (i.e., feeling attacked, devalued, or humiliated)
- Which has more toxicity—for-profits or not-for-profits?

II. What is a “Crucial Conversation”?  
“A discussion between two or more people where 1) stakes are high, 2) opinions vary, and 3) emotions run strong.”

What are common types of Crucial Conversations?
✓ Approaching the friend who has not mentioned the $500. that you lent him two months ago
✓ Talking to your teenage son who you suspect might be experimenting with drugs
✓ Telling your partner of three years that you’d like to go separate ways
✓ Approaching a coworker who missed a major deadline
✓ Giving an unfavorable performance review
✓ Conversing as a work team about issues that need resolved but seem too “hot-button” to approach
### Why have Crucial Conversations?

**What happens when we don’t?**

- Tend to avoid the other person; irritation comes out as sarcasm or unspoken tension
- Complain to others but not address the person directly
- If a group decision, people may remain silent, then quietly sabotage the project
- Ironically, relationships often get worse
- Issues go unresolved; At work, morale and quality of work suffer; At home, issues grow and situations deteriorate

### “In most organizations, managers and employees have learned to sweep conflicts under the rug in hopes that they will go away. As a result, they have developed cultures that encourage people to not fully communicate what they really want and settle for partial solutions or no solutions at all...When we suppress our conflicts, we make the problem disappear before we have had a chance to reveal its underlying sources, correct it, learn from it, and break through to the other side.”

(Cloke & Goldsmith, Resolving Conflicts at Work, Jossey-Bass, 2011)

### Three choices when dealing with crucial conversations and conflicts...

1. **Avoid the conflict/conversation**
2. **Handle the situation, but do so poorly**
3. **Handle the situation, but do so skillfully (and more confidently)**
Two Key, Foundational Statements

1. 
   Who you are as a person on a day-to-day basis strongly influences how people will react to you during tense times.

2. 
   One of your best conflict prevention and resolution strategies is to practice, on a daily basis, exceptional listening skills.

What the do’s and don’ts of having a potentially emotionally-charged conversation?

III. Basic Framework for Resolving a Conflict with a Colleague

1. Make a request of the person that you find a time to talk about the situation

2. Choose a mutually-agreeable location and time conducive to private, uninterrupted conversation; Extend the “olive branch” in finding a good time

3. Begin the meeting by thanking the person for taking the time to meet with you and by stating your optimism that you can work together respectfully to come up with solutions
4. State as neutrally as you can what you see the disagreement to be about—

*Start with facts, not conclusions*


**Option 1:** “Lately, it seems like you’ve been dropping the ball sometimes in getting things done that need to be done.”

**Option 2:** “Last week, I received a call from Barb Smith saying you were supposed to drop off a packet of materials at 1:00 but that you never showed up.”

5. Tell the person you’d like to understand his/her position on the issue, and then listen *without interruption* as they speak

6. Acknowledge any areas of agreement between the two of you; Focus on common ground and mutual interests instead of debating opposing positions; Try to move from *me vs. you* to *us vs. the problem*

7. Together, brainstorm solutions that would better meet both of your needs

8. Never underestimate the power of conciliatory gestures, which are often the crack in the door that leads to a breakthrough in the conflict

Examples of Conciliatory Gestures:

- Apologizing
- Owning responsibility
- Conceding
- Self-disclosing
- Expressing positive feelings for the other
- Initiating a both-gain approach to the problem
9. If you have reason to offer a conciliatory gesture, do so. If you have offered a conciliatory gesture and it is met with nothing but anger and denial, realize you cannot force change upon the person. Do not stoop to “wrestling with a pig in the mud”!

10. If you do reach some level of resolution, be very clear about agreements that you come to to help solve the issues, and make sure you both are “on board”.

11. Again, express your appreciation for their openness to meeting with you and working together to achieve common goals.

IV. Dealing With Upset Customers

- For every customer who complains, there are _____ others who are unhappy but remain silent.
- The average wronged customer will tell _____ people.

[http://scoremichigansgreatsouthwest.org/high_cost_of_losing_a_customer.html]

The HEAT Method of Service Recovery

- **H**ear them out (Let them talk, then paraphrase; Fix the person first, then the problem)
- **E**mpathize (Acknowledge their inconvenience)
- **A**pologize (Sincerely apologize; Let them know you are here to help; Tell them what you will do)
- **T**hank them (for bringing it to your attention)
During service recovery, remember…

- Better they tell you than fifty (or five thousand!) others.
- An upset customer truly can be an opportunity to gain a more loyal customer.
- Fix the person first, then the problem.
- Watch your body language and tone of voice.
- Know if you have any atonement options.

Do’s and Don’ts of Deescalating Situations with Angry Customers

DO NOT…
- Interrupt.
- Say, “Calm down.”
- Blame another department.
- Argue back.
- Use confusing jargon.

DO…
- Humanize yourself and them as much as possible.

Phrases to use if you want to make angry customers more angry!

- “No.”
- “I can’t.”
- “I don’t know.”
- “You’ll have to…”
- “You should have…”
- “I’ll be honest with you…”

--adapted from Beyond Hello, Davis, Aurora: Now Hear This Publishing, Inc., 2003
V. De-escalation Techniques
for Taking Some of the “Heat” Out of Tense Situations

- State your intention upfront in a positive way, and if things get heated, restate what your intention is and is not
- Check your motives upfront and check your ego at the door; Ask, “Do I really want to peacefully and successfully resolve this, or do I just want to be right?”

- No matter what, keep calm, respectful, and professional! Be aware of the warning signs of emotions rising, and proceed cautiously.
- Avoid charged, inflamed language (“You always”; “You never”; “You’re wrong”); Many times, tentative language is more persuasive (“We might want to consider...”)
- Realize that you might have to sift by past anger to get at the ‘real’ emotion

- Be aware of your own natural style (and others’ styles) of responding to conflict, i.e., silence or violence
  - **Masking**—Showing feelings through sarcasm, jokes
  - **Avoiding**—Changing subject; Holding back opinions
  - **Withdrawing**—Avoiding the person altogether
  - **Controlling**—Manipulating others to get your way
  - **Labeling**—Labeling people or ideas to dismiss them
  - **Attacking**—Verbally attacking through belittling or intimidation

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What is one point that you will remember from this session?

A Closing Challenge…

“You know, there’s something that I could do to make this kid’s day go a whole lot more smoothly.”

Challenge: What do you uniquely have that might help make someone else’s day go “a whole lot more smoothly”?

Brenda Clark Hamilton, MA Ed.
Fresh Coffee: Professional Growth Programs
214 Robinson Drive • Algona, IA 50511
515.295.2379 • freecoffee@nrc.net

www.BrendaClarkHamilton.com
www.facebook.com/BrendaClarkHamilton
LinkedIn: Brenda Clark Hamilton