

## Conflict and Disputes

Conflicts are an inevitable part of life – not just in our personal relationships but also in the workplace. Conflict is commonly associated with hostility and arguments and is generally perceived to be destructive and undesirable.

However conflict CAN be overcome and many *benefits* for the parties involved can result. Handled expertly, conflict can be a *creative and positive experience*. Whether at home or in the workplace, conflict can:

- ✓ open up the possibility for new ideas
- ✓ enable better understanding between the parties
- ✓ strengthen and improve relationships
- ✓ facilitate more successful solutions to problems

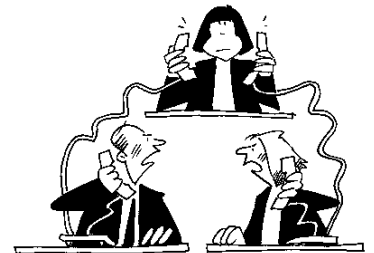
*"You can never solve a problem on the level on which it was created." - Albert Einstein*

*"There is more power in joined minds than in one mind." - Anonymous*

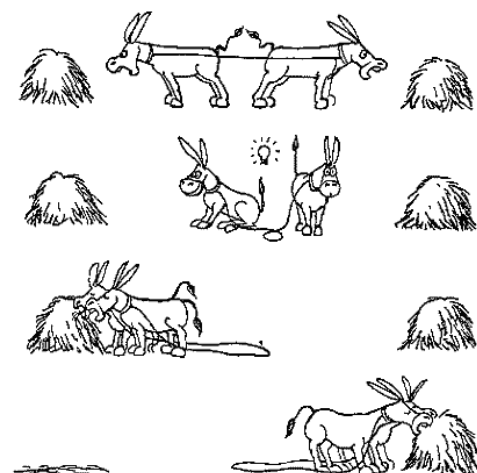
### Ten Tips on our Attitude towards Conflict

By shifting our attitude and behaviour, with experience and practice, we can move from an adversarial approach to a co-operative or 'common ground' approach. Following are some points to consider that may assist you:

1. **Try to accept that conflicts are a natural component of life:** We all have diverse needs, beliefs and differences so we will always have conflicts.
2. **View conflict as an opportunity in disguise:** Conflicts don't have to be stressful, traumatic and destructive. If we consider conflict as an opportunity to grow, learn and improve relationships we will manage our disputes much more easily. In themselves, conflicts are neither positive nor negative. It is *the way we deal with the situation and the other parties* that determines the consequences – we can have a degree of control over the outcome if we approach conflict in the right way.
3. **Be aware of your initial response and maintain self-control:** We all have automatic reactions to conflict or disputes. They can vary widely including ignoring or running away, putting up our defences or becoming angry and fighting back. Our immediate responses depend on what the conflict is about and who is involved. Instead of giving in to our initial impulse, try to pause, take a deep breath and *think about our approach before speaking*.
4. **Choose your approach – the outcome depends on it:** We always have choices. Sometimes it is best to forgive and forget - it just may not be worth dealing with or risking a relationship. Asking ourselves "Do I really want to pursue this?" should be our first step. In other cases, we may feel the best response may be to say "no." However when the objective is to solve the problem in a positive way, a *cooperative approach* is the best option. We have choices:
  - a) a *win-lose* approach (where we focus on each other as the problem);
  - b) a *lose-lose* approach (where no matter what action is taken, both parties will not resolve the problem) or;
  - c) a *win-win* approach (where we solve the problem together.)



## Conflict and Disputes (cont'd)

5. **Communication and Information - listening and learning:** Conflicts are most commonly based on poor communication and lack of information. By finding out more about each party (*asking questions* and *actively listening* until we truly understand each other's point of view), we increase the chances of successfully resolving the issues involved. All humans have a basic need to be heard and understood. Genuinely listening and being heard can actually transform a conflict.
  
6. **Determine what is really important - Interests:** Disagreements tend to occur over our *positions* (the way we see things or what we want). We are generally not accustomed to discussing our interests and needs - the *reasons* why our positions are important to us. However, by *finding common ground* through expressing our interests and needs honestly, and asking the other parties about theirs, often some overlap or similarities in both parties' interests and needs are discovered. Once these are highlighted, we are likely to find solutions.
 
  
7. **Consider the other party's point of view:** Every conflict involves a relationship – for example, personal (within the family) or business contacts. Disputes can be very emotional at times but we need to take actions that can preserve our future relationships if at all possible. Whatever happens, respect the other party's dignity – they are entitled to their own viewpoint, even if we don't initially understand what the dispute is about or how it has come to this point. A lasting agreement can only hold if the parties grow to trust one another. Take responsibility for our role in the conflict and stay away from blaming - it only creates resentment and anger. Maintaining civil, dignified communication will go a long way to avoiding aggravating the situation.
  
8. **Look for mutual interests:** Finding common ground can be achieved by discussing our interests openly and understanding where all parties are 'on the same page' with various issues. It does not mean settling for the lowest common denominator where all parties feel they have to reluctantly compromise. By exploring options, it means a *viable mutually beneficial solution* can be identified and worked towards together.
  
9. **Ask for help:** By gaining professional assistance when needed, you can learn new skills and be guided through the process to resolve conflict successfully. A benefit to doing so is gaining understanding and knowledge of how to prevent such disputes arising in the future and how to deal better with them. If all parties are *genuinely committed* to the process, a solution is possible. The objective is to generate alternatives to the current unsatisfactory situation by discovering and addressing the key issues, not just the superficial symptoms, so the conflict is less likely to recur and a lasting agreement can be maintained.
  
10. **Have courage and reap the rewards:** By choosing to deal with conflict in a non-adversarial manner we expand the number of options we have, take control of our situation and can preserve our relationships instead of just joining the queue in the legal system, often with dire consequences. Instead, we significantly increase our skills and ability to successfully resolve conflict. Please ask us how we can assist you personally.