

Common Mistakes People Make in Handling Conflict

Making Insulting Comments:

Even if you believe the other person acted like a "jerk" or "moron," insulting her/him by calling her names is not likely to be an effective strategy to get her/his cooperation to make agreements with you. This applies to almost any other negative assumption or attribution you may make about the other person, (e.g., "You're crazy as a loon." "You're totally incompetent."), as well. If you say things to or about her/him that s/he finds insulting, s/he will probably continue to fight with you.

Perhaps the most destructive comments are those in which one person makes evaluative pronouncements about the other person's personality or character (e.g., "He is lazy, dishonest, and worthless.") Even if the speaker believes this with all her/his heart, it is not likely to help her/him gain the other person's cooperation in finding mutually agreeable solutions.

Some people don't recognize that their choice of words may be offensive to the other person. (Example: "You have been harassing me for weeks!")

While the speaker may very well feel "harassed," a term like "harass" is likely to evoke a defensive reaction, especially if followed by the word "you." And this is true regardless of whether an independent panel of experts or a court would agree that the behavior in question was, in fact, harassing! If you say something like this, a defensive reaction is NOT going to help you to get her cooperation. She may feel the need to assert that the behavior in question was not, in fact, "harassing" OR she may tell you that the only reason she did what she did was because of YOUR behavior in doing X. Debating whether behavior is or isn't "harassment" or trying to affix blame on one another is unlikely gain the cooperation of either party. A more productive discussion would probably evolve from questions like, "Given my concerns, how would you have preferred for me to respond?" or "If I have those concerns in the future, how would you prefer for me to respond?"

Impulsive Comments

Some of the things you may be most tempted to say or do will not be helpful. These are things that might feel "good" in the moment, but, in the long run, will interfere with your reaching your goal. If you feel mad or hurt as a result of something the other person says, you may be tempted to say things or act in ways that will harden the conflict. Resist this temptation to the best of your ability. This does not mean "keep it to yourself." It means "discuss whatever concerns you in ways the other person will be able to hear." If nothing else, if/when such a critical moment occurs, ask for a "time out" or don't say anything until you are able to avoid

the impulse to lash out. The silence may be uncomfortable, but it is far less damaging to the goal of getting the other person's cooperation to work with you to resolve the dispute than giving in to the urge to "respond in kind."

"Mind-reading"

"Mind-reading" is another common mistake made by disputants. This occurs when people observe the actions of another person and attribute motives to her/him. People can also get pretty creative in making multiple negative attributions. Notice in the examples that follow how each one adds yet another assumption or attribution:

- "You are trying to fire me."
- "Why don't you just come out and admit that you're trying to fire me?"
- "Why don't you just admit that you want to fire me because of I'm gay?"

In the third example, the speaker assumes that the person s/he is talking to:

- is trying to hide something,
- has the intention to terminate the employment of the speaker, and
- wants to terminate her/his employment because s/he does not like gay people.

"Always" and Never" "Statements:

"Always" or "never" statements often lead to an unproductive discussion about examples that contradict the statement. For example, if you say, "You always miss those meetings," the other person may feel compelled to point out all the times s/he attended the meetings. Similarly, if you say, "You NEVER get to our meetings on time," you may find yourself in a conversation about the time(s) when the person DID get to the meeting on time. Simply avoiding these statements allows you to spend your mediation time more productively.

If you make any of the above mistakes, try to stop, take a breath, and, if necessary, apologize. After you've done something that insults the other person, that's really all you can do. Pretending as if nothing happened when you know that you have acted in a disrespectful or hurtful way toward the other person will not promote respect, trust, or cooperation. Owning up to these things gives you a much better chance of achieving getting back on track.

What Works Better?

Use "I Statements and Ask Open-Ended Questions:"

Making “I” statements and asking open-ended questions work much better than making “you” statements. For example:

“I didn’t like it that you asked me four times about my progress in completing the report last Tuesday. I don’t understand why you did that.”

“I don’t remember these events in the way you described them. What I remember is . . .”

"Why do you think X?"

"I’m confused because earlier you said X and now, it sounds like you’re saying Y. Can you clarify this for me?"

Making the last statement above, rather than, “No, that’s untrue,” or (worse) "You're a liar!" (even if you know it is untrue), allows the other party to “save face” because the speaker does not force the issue as a “right” or “wrong” issue and, instead, makes an honest “I” statement. Also, sometimes people have different information and are not intentionally lying. If this is the case, questions or "I statements" will allow you to avoid inflaming the conflict and deal with the facts. While the other party is free to disagree, she is less likely to feel insulted than she would if she were called “a liar” and she is less likely to disagree about the facts than she would be if she were told, "No, you're wrong!" (even if she is wrong).

Neutral Language:

Use language that describes what the other person has done in a neutral way - without evaluating her/him or her/his behavior. For example, rather than labeling someone's behavior as "harassing," here's another option:

"You called me four times last Tuesday."

Focus on How Events Have Affected you:

Focus on how it affected you when the other person did X. For example:

"When you called me for the fourth time, I was very frustrated and irritated because I was working on something the Chancellor needed immediately I found it disruptive to my concentration."