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Leadership Communication 101 - How to Change Conflict into Collaboration

A Resource for Your Leadership Development

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INTRODUCTION

Conflict is not a bad thing. In fact, it can be the first step toward collaboration. Keep reading to find out how.

All conflict can be reduced to two basic areas of concern:

1.   *Concern for self, and*

2.   *Concern for the others involved.*

We might express this as "What I need" and "What you need." When these two items are not in harmony (or when we *think* they are not in harmony) we have conflict. When you foresee a conflict situation or find yourself in the middle of one, here are two actions that will move the situation away from *conflict* and toward *collaboration*.

1. STATE "HERE'S WHAT I NEED FROM YOU."

The first thing you must clarify is what you really need in this situation. If you don't address what you need, you are not just being a "nice guy." Nor are you being a "servant leader." You certainly aren't being assertive. From a communication perspective, you are simply avoiding the issue or accommodating to the request of someone else.

What is most important to you in this situation? What needs to happen for you to view this situation as "successful"? First clarify that for yourself. Then communicate that to others. As you clarify, you will want to provide specific details as well. Be clear *why* you have this need, by *when* you need things completed, and *how* you need them to be done. That level of detail is especially important for successful delegation. The more clearly you can define success for yourself and communicate what success looks like for others, the more likely you will actually experience that goal. Make the goal so focused that there is no reason to miss it.

2. ASK "WHAT DO YOU NEED FROM ME?"

If you don't get this information, then you can come off as being aggressive and uncaring. If you want to be truly collaborative, both your needs and their needs must be addressed. By asking the question, you demonstrate humility as a leader. You don't claim to know everything, and you are asking for feedback to meet the real concerns of others. By the way, you can address these items in either order. Sometimes you will want to start with "What do you need from me?" After you've clarified that, then you can say, "Here's what I need from you in order to make that happen."

Imagine that you are working with a team of people to plan an event, and you need to determine who will speak at the event. You've communicated the need and asked the team to bring a list of suggestions. When you get to the meeting, no one is prepared with suggestions. How can you respond appropriately and keep your cool? Here is one example of both expressing your needs and being open to the needs of the group.

"As I communicated previously, we need to make measurable progress today on selecting our speakers for the event. That means we need an initial list of who we can contact to determine their availability. It will take time to confirm our speakers, and if some of them aren't available, we will need additional time to find other options. So, what do you need from me in order to get that list of names together today?"

In our example, we've communicated the **what** (measurable progress), the **when** (today), the **why** (it takes time to confirm speakers), and the **how** (we need to create an initial contact list).

PRACTICAL TIPS:

‣ Get as specific as possible. For example, instead of saying "I need more feedback," try "I need to hear from you about both what I'm doing wrong and what I'm doing right. That way I can continue what's working and correct what's not."

▶ Figure out what is most important and focus on that. Force yourself to determine what is most important *right now*. Don't ask for more than three things - the other person will feel overwhelmed. If you want a direct report to make changes, don't bury him in a list of seven different things. Identify the one thing that will make the biggest difference this month. Plan to meet again next month and re-evaluate the situation.

▶ Set a time limit for the conversation. Your boss or direct report may either (a) feel threatened by the request or (b) simply need time to figure out what they really need from you. When our family deals with conflict, I sometimes set a 10 minute timer and say, "We will get as far as we can on this in the next 10 minutes. If we can resolve the issue today, great. If not, we will come back to it tomorrow."

▶ Notice an overall theme for these practical tips: focus. As a rule of thumb, the more focused your attempted change, the more likely you are to be successful. Set a goal so focused that there is no excuse for missing it.

A FINAL THOUGHT

Getting clarity on "what I need from you" and "what you need from me" won't fully resolve a conflict, but it's a good start. Clearly identifying and communicating these your needs and their needs will help you move away from *destructive* conflict into *productive* collaboration.

Recommended Resources

- A helpful tool for measuring how much you emphasize "concern for self" vs. "concern for others" and action steps for making that more collaborative is the *Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument..*

- For more on the skill of giving feedback, download *How To Give Effective Feedback* from the Influence Coaching website.

- Check out this blog post for more on how to be both a "nice guy" and an effective leader.

- Here's a blog post on the biggest danger of servant leadership.

- For more on negotiation, be sure to see William Ury's work, such as this TED talk.

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