

Conflict Resolution & Difficult Conversations

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Conflict resolution and having difficult conversations are not soft, but critical skills in life and leadership. Learning how to navigate complex situations and have meaningful conversations can help improve relationships, prevent misunderstandings, and strengthen teams so we can effectively solve problems.

The amount of time people spend addressing conflict with relationships in life can vary greatly. In some cases, people may be able to resolve conflicts quickly and with minimal effort. In other cases, people may spend significant amounts of time attempting to resolve conflicts, often with little success. Ultimately, the amount of time spent addressing conflict in relationships is determined by the complexity of the conflict and the willingness of the individuals involved to work together to find a mutually satisfactory resolution.

The best way to set the stage for conflict resolution is to ensure time and energy are proactively put into the relationship. Without an established relationship, feedback will often come across as criticism. Whether Soldier, Airman, friend or family, when dealing with people we must think about the impact of our actions. People generally aren't willing to listen to criticism or unsolicited advice from someone they don't have an established relationship with (trust) because it can come off as uninvited, judgmental or hurtful. We're not talking about unicorns and rainbows here, we're talking about developing deliberate strategies which treat conflict at the root cause so people can effectively solve problems and progress towards mission, goals, love, or life. Below are some strategies to consider:

1. Clarify your intentions: Make sure to first clarify your intentions and identify your goals for the conversation. Ask yourself why you need to have the conversation and what you hope to achieve. This will help you understand the necessity and utility of resolving conflict. You can ask: What are the facts? What bias and assumptions might I be making? What's the benefit of resolution? What's the cost of no resolution?

2. Prepare ahead: Before the conversation, prepare by writing down your points, consider the other person's perspective, and imagine how the conversation might go. You've heard before, "If you fail to plan, plan to fail." That statement holds true in conflict resolution. Don't let fingers cross difficult interpersonal situations. Deliberate strategy and planning wins.

3. Use open-ended questions: Ask open-ended questions to encourage further discussion and to get to the root of the issue. Seek understanding and win-win outcomes (an integrative bargaining approach). People tend to be more receptive to feedback and collaboration when one communicates with curiosity and mutuality.

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4. Remain calm: During the conversation, remain calm and avoid using accusatory language. Self-management, a critical emotional intelligence skill, can help you investigate various sides of the story so you have accurate information, and therefore can make the best decisions to resolve the difficult situation.

5. Agree on next steps: End the conversation on a positive note by agreeing on a plan of action or steps to take moving forward. Communication enhances clarity, and clarity enhances commitment. The clearer the direction is for the resolution, the more committed to the plan all parties will be. This will help ensure that the conversation has a productive outcome with ample follow-through.

Conflict resolution and having difficult conversations helps foster healthy communication, creates a safe and respectful environment, and promotes problem solving. By staying connected with people on your team and in your life you'll find opportunities to gain perspective and understanding, while listening to the other person's point of view.

The best teams are not absent conflict, they are masters of recognizing and resolving conflict.