

CAPS Newsletter

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Managing Difficult People

We all find ourselves in situations where we have to manage “difficult” people. Difficult people behave in a way that aggravates others, creating conflict. The following offers tips for managing difficult people and an approach to make conflict constructive.

Guidelines for Managing Difficult People

1. Change your cognitions. Prepare yourself cognitively to deal with the situation. Talk yourself through the difficult situation (“Stay calm and focused...I know what I’m talking about...”).
2. Deal with your anxiety. Practice deep breathing and relaxation in preparation and during the interaction.
3. Get to know yourself and the triggers for your own emotional responding.
4. Take direct action. Learn and practice assertiveness skills.
5. Direct your efforts at solving the problem. Ignore emotional content and focus on the issues at hand.
6. De-escalate the situation by lowering your tone and emotion.
7. Acknowledge the other person’s feelings and position.
8. Request clarification.
9. Use “I-messages” to take responsibility for your own feelings. (“When you do/say X, I feel Y”)
10. Use humor.
11. Set up some ground rules and time limits for the meeting.
12. Assert your position first. Set the stage before you are attacked.
13. Withdraw from the situation and possibly suggest addressing it at another time or place.

14. Establish ground-rules, policies, and procedures for organizational change.
15. Adapt the above suggestions to your own approach and personality style.
16. Remember – you have options for action – get on with your life!
From: Alberti, R. M. (1995). *Your perfect right: A guide to assertive living*. San Luis Obispo, CA: Impact Publishers.

Eight-Step Model for Constructive Conflict

Step 1: Warm-up – This is the solo part. You need to ask yourself what you are upset about and what you would like to do about it. You must be aware of your wants, needs, and desires.

Step 2: Set the time – Agree on a specific time to resolve the conflict.

Step 3: State the problem – Stick to the facts.

Step 4: State feelings – Use “I” messages. Resist the temptation to place blame. If you do, the other person is likely to become defensive and it will be harder to keep the conflict on a constructive track.

Step 5: Make a specific request – Keep it simple, clear, and direct. Ask clearly and directly for what will satisfy you. If you don’t have a specific request, brainstorm possible solutions. All ideas can be shared, both practical and impractical.

Step 6: Respond and negotiate – Now the listening person gets to talk. Appropriate responses include:

- Yes, I’ll do it.
- Yes, I agree, with the following conditions.
- No, I won’t do it.
- No, I don’t want to do that, but I would be willing to do this.
- Selecting a solution together.

Step 7: Reach resolution.

Step 8: Clarify the agreement.

From: Johnson, K. (1991). *Trusting Ourselves*. New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press.

Positive Aspects of Conflict

1. Conflicts *make us more aware* of problems within our relationships that need to be solved.
2. Conflicts *encourage change*.
3. Conflicts *energize and increase motivation* to deal with problems.
4. Conflicts *make life more interesting*.
5. *Better decisions* are generally made when there is disagreement about what the decision should be among the people responsible for the decision.
6. Conflicts *reduce the day-to-day irritations* of relating to someone.
7. Conflicts *help you understand what you are like as a person*.
8. Conflicts *can be fun* when they are not taken too seriously.
9. Conflict can *deepen and enrich a relationship*, strengthening each person’s conviction that the relationship can hold up under stress, communicating the commitments and values of each person that the other must take into account, and generally keeping the relationship clear of irritations and resentments so that positive feelings can be experienced fully.
Adapted From: Johnson, D. W. (1986). *Reaching Out*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

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