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Mastering Conflict Resolution

by David C. Miller



Because I believe that relationships are everything in business, I wanted to write an article on conflict prevention and resolution. Much of this material comes from my associate, Brian Middleton, and was developed in the work we do with family-owned businesses. These principles apply to leaders whether you own your own business or work for an organization as an employee. If you deal with other human beings, you need to know how to handle conflict.

INTRODUCTION

Conflicts in business are inevitable. To succeed in business and in life we need to develop the skills that lead to effective conflict resolution. This includes conflict with clients, colleagues, superiors and direct reports. Many businesses and organizations have failed because they have lacked a clearly defined and agreed-upon process to resolve conflict.

We must also overcome the false notion that conflict is inherently bad. On the contrary, conflict when properly managed strengthens and improves the quality of our relationships.

As leaders, the best approach to creating a business culture where those around us effectively resolve their conflicts is to personally model conflict resolution skills. This article will provide you with time-

tested and proven tools that will lead you to effective conflict management and resolution.

Principle #1: *Leaders who effectively resolve conflict respect the unlimited power of their words.*

The guiding principle from an ancient proverb is “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.”

Do our tongues really have the power to administer “death” in others? Well, yes, in the sense that our words can destroy the reputation of another, divide the unity of a group, poison the attitudes of others and wound the spirit of another for a lifetime.

However, our words can also bring encouragement, affirmation, approval, appreciation, hope, healing and restoration to others. So recognize that your choice of words, when in conflict with others, will lead to life or death.

Principle #2: *Leaders who effectively resolve conflict practice preventative maintenance in their relationships.*

The most effective means of conflict resolution is the practice of “conflict prevention.” In other words, the best way to resolve a conflict is to prevent it from occurring in the first place.



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Defining roles, responsibilities and expectations of one another is the critical “first step” in relational preventive maintenance.

The essential “second step” is consistently reviewing our behaviors with one another in mutual accountability.

The same principle of “preventive maintenance” that we apply to our physical health, automobiles and equipment must also be applied to our relationships.

Principle #3: Leaders who effectively resolve conflict follow “The Four Rules of Communication.”

Here are the four rules you want to memorize and practice.

RULE #1 - BE HONEST

Guiding principle - “We are to speak the truth to one another in a spirit of love and respect.”

To practice this principle effectively, **we first need “to speak”**. No one can read our minds, nor can we read the thoughts of others. Yet how often do we **assume** that others know what we’re thinking and that we understand where they’re coming from? The answer is most likely, “all the time”.

Since resolving conflict is actually communicating (not assuming) with each other, we must resist the temptation to be silent. Refusing to speak and address the issue can be equally as destructive as exploding in anger.

Secondly, we need to **“speak the truth”**. What does this mean? Several things are involved here:

- We refuse to lie, deceive or distort reality in our interaction with others.
- We express our feelings as well as our thoughts.
- We speak with congruency (How we communicate is congruent with What we communicate).
- We refuse to sugarcoat or speak in innuendos that mask the real message or intensity we want to send to others.

Thirdly, to be effective we want to communicate in a **“spirit of love and respect.”** This means that when we speak, we place the needs, concerns and well-being of others in high regard. To do this we must pay attention both to our words and how we express those words (e.g., volume, tone, facial expressions, body language, etc.).

RULE #2 - KEEP CURRENT

Guiding principle - “We must refuse to allow the sun to go down upon our anger or any form of unresolved conflict in our lives.”

“Keeping current” with one another means that when a problem or conflict enters the relationship, we **immediately address it without hesitation or delay**.

The longer we fail to address a relational problem, the more difficult it becomes to resolve. This is because unresolved conflict:

- **Opens the way to bitterness and resentment**, which in turn limits our ability to listen. Relational walls result.
- Causes us to lose objectivity with one another, fostering distrust and eroding credibility.
- Causes us to “push problems under the rug” which creates emotional baggage. This baggage accumulates and clutters up relationships.

RULE #3 - ATTACK PROBLEMS, NOT PEOPLE

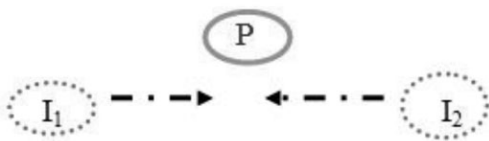
Guiding principle - “When we find ourselves in conflict, we must attack the problem, not the person.”

We must clearly identify, separate and distinguish the problem from the people involved. Separating the problem from the person helps to objectively identify the issues.

When we attack others rather than the problem, we usually:

1. **Bypass the conflict**, missing the real issues.
2. Engage in **character assassination**, limiting our ability to objectively address the issues.
3. **Incite retaliatory responses** that attack others, creating additional problems.

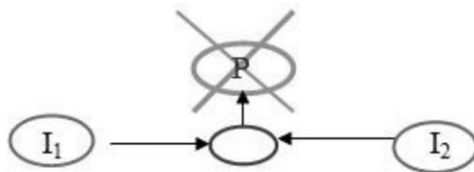
This dynamic can be illustrated in the following diagram. The “P” represents the problem while “I₁ and I₂” represent two separate individuals. *Note: The problem is not addressed when people begin attacking each other!*



When we attack problems rather than people:

1. This **focuses on the conflict**, creating the “possibility” of resolving it.
2. We are challenged to **examine our own responses** rather than focusing on the failure of others.
3. Fixing the “problem” becomes the mutual focus of both parties, **creating hope that the problem will be resolved**.

This dynamic can be illustrated in the following diagram. Both parties unite, drawing upon one another’s experiences, gifts, talents and resources with the goal of solving the problem.



When we attack problems, we become “**solution oriented**” which leads to positive attitudes and behaviors. Alternatively, when we attack people, we become “**problem oriented**” which leads to negative attitudes and behaviors.

The reason so many conflicts begin and often fail to be resolved is because one or more partners choose to attack the other person rather than the problem.

RULE #4 - ACT! DON'T REACT!

Guiding principle - “We must assume personal responsibility for our attitudes, words and responses in any conflict.”

If we’re honest, we find the temptation to act like a “victim” in conflict, shifting the blame away from ourselves, while pointing the finger at others. The truth is that no matter how irresponsible the other person may be, **we must assume responsibility for ourselves**.

The paradox is that effective leaders win the respect of their followers when they’re willing to take responsibility for their failures.

The reason so many conflicts begin and often fail to be resolved is because one or more parties fail to assume responsibility for their behavior.

BECOME A MASTER AT HANDLING CONFLICT

Mastering conflict can be one of the highest-impact skills you can develop in life and in business. Here are some tips on how you can utilize this article to develop these skills:

1. Re-read this article on two separate occasions with the goal of absorbing the material.
2. Post a copy of the “Four Rules” in a prominent place in your work area so you can refer to it frequently.
3. Practice “Monday Morning Quarterbacking” when you have episodes of conflict. Reflect on which of the rules you succeeded at implementing and which ones you struggle with the most.
4. Keep working at getting better at handling conflict. Don’t be discouraged by setbacks. Remember, it’s a process of growth. Be patient with yourself.

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