

Understanding Disputes

When we find ourselves involved in a dispute, it can sometimes take us by surprise. We may not see ourselves as people who get into conflicts at all. We are familiar with some amount of conflict in our everyday lives, but we are not always sure what to do when it starts getting bigger. This lack of awareness makes it difficult to avoid disputes and to decrease conflict once it has started. Our stress increases and our unhelpful behaviours start to come out and make things worse. Before we know it, we're in a conflict loop.

Conflict loop

When we do not separate someone's actual behaviour from our interpretation of it, we can end up in a conflict loop. For example, say a manager accused a colleague of behaving unprofessionally at work. The manager might think they are stating a fact: their colleague is unprofessional. But that's really an interpretation of the behaviour. It's making a judgment about them. The behaviour that was actually observed – which caused the manager to get upset – is that the colleague interrupted him during a work meeting. A conflict loop goes something like this:

- We select a piece of information – the other person's behaviour – to focus on. This is our factual observation.
- We form an opinion based on this limited amount of information. In conflict, the observation is interpreted negatively.
- We have a physical reaction to our negative point of view. Our feelings have kicked in. We might feel anger, sadness, or frustration.
- We express our opinion and negative emotions as if they are facts about the other person.
- The other person does not want to be seen negatively and reacts defensively.
- We see the other person's defensive behaviours and it confirms our thinking that this person would never be able to have a reasonable discussion with us.

Separate facts from interpretation

One way to avoid conflict loops is to practice separating behaviours (the facts we observe) from our interpretation. In the example about the work colleague, by focussing on the facts, the manager could have asked his colleague to please not interrupt him during work meetings rather than call his colleague unprofessional.

Question your assumptions

Another way to avoid conflict loops is to question your assumptions about what another person's motives or intentions are. Next time you find yourself making a negative assumption about someone else's intentions, stop for a moment and re-examine the facts. Are there things you aren't sure of? Is it possible the other person wasn't making an attack but stating an opinion? Is it possible they meant something else?

Positions and interests

Another common situation in conflict is for each party to take a stand from which they will not budge. Each person has a solution in mind for how to solve the problem or get their needs met. They try to force it on the other or simply resist the solution the other has in mind. In other words, they take a position. People think that by taking a tough position they stand a better chance of getting what they want.

A better way to approach conflict is to focus on interests. Interests are the underlying needs and desires that motivate people. For example, I might insist that you close the window (my position), but I'm really just awfully cold (my interest). In this example, a conflict might arise because the other person's position is that they want the window to stay open. Their interest is that they need fresh air. Another example of positions and interests is the orange story.

The orange story

Let's say you are fighting with someone else over an orange. Your position is that you want all of the orange. The other person's position is that they want the whole orange too. In fact, they call you greedy and say you cannot have it all. Let the conflict begin! Insults are hurled and you start to see each other as the enemy. Most of us have taken a hard position like this in conflict but it rarely ends satisfactorily.

Get curious

To stop a power struggle, you need to get curious about the other person's needs. In this story, you would ask the other person why they want the orange. What is so important to them about it? What is their concern about not getting it? What do they hope will happen as a result of your conversation? After getting curious about what is driving the other person, you discover that their interest was in using the orange rind to make a cake. They discover that your interest was in using the juice to make a drink. Turns out you can share the orange and both get your needs met. When you are faced with a conflict, getting at each other's underlying interests is a much easier and productive way to find a solution.

A word about feelings

When in conflict we often feel our face flush, jaw clench, or heart beat faster; we might hold our breath or feel sick to the stomach. Our response to those feelings is either to withdraw from the difficult conversation (“I’m out of here”); or go into attack mode (“You’re crazy; you have no idea what you’re talking about”). In these instances we feel threatened and unable to think clearly, which makes resolving a conflict difficult. In addition, most people do not always have a positive view of other people’s intense feelings. We might say, “He is acting like such a child” or “She should just get over it.”

When either you or someone else express negative feelings, it indicates something needs attention. So expect it and be prepared. Communication will work better if you have an open discussion about each other’s feelings before moving onto the issues at hand. Moving too quickly to discuss the issue can lead to an increase in intense emotions. Until feelings are acknowledged, we are not able to think clearly enough to engage our thinking brain.