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## **10 Key Principles for Effective Conflict Management**

### **Principle 1 – Eleanor Roosevelt’s Insight: Nobody can ever put you down without your consent**

This concept is so important I put it first on my list of skills to develop as a communicator in any relationship. It is both enlightening and empowering. On one hand, we need to see that if we have insecurities, then we become vulnerable to getting too easily hurt or defensive when someone calls those perceived flaws out. Resolving those feelings of shame or guilt makes us more prepared to handle confrontations – even unjustified ones – without over-reacting. This will empower you to remain composed and in control of the process of resolving the conflict at hand. If you cannot resolve those insecurities on your own, seek help from a professional to heal yourself within. In doing so, you can improve your ability to manage conflict with others.

### **Principle 2 – Be assertive, not aggressive, passive, or passive-aggressive**

Everyone has personal rights – personal respect and physical safety – and the assertive response to conflict situations holds respect for both your rights and that of the others involved in the dispute. While aggressive responses can serve to defend your rights, they offend the rights of *others*. Passive responses do the opposite: respecting others’ rights while yours get offended. Passive-aggressive responses (e.g., not overtly confronting a conflict, but doing or saying something indirect to hurt others with whom you feel upset) are purely retaliatory and usually enrage the other party. Showing *mutual* respect serves as a great starting point that can pave the way for effective conflict resolution.

### **Principle 3 – Accept the fact that we live in an unfair world, and work with this in mind**

Psychiatrist Dr. Phil Stutz says, “Your quest for fairness puts a hold on your life”. Holding grudges over real or perceived transgressions in your life can get you stuck in the past (thereby inhibiting forward growth). You can instead acknowledge your hurt, accept that even *you* have likely acted unfairly in the past – or received preferential treatment that was unfair to others – and seek effective means of dealing with your present situation. On the other hand, becoming indignant every time you feel unfairly treated ignores the reality that *we do not live in a fair world*. The more unhinged you become over the transgression, the more justified you will feel in retaliating against that person. In doing so, you become a hypocrite and can even look like the bad actor in the eyes of others. Ironically, *you may feel like the victim, but you look like the abuser*.

#### **Principle 4 – “Begin with the end in mind” in all conflict situations**

Carefully consider the questions, “How would I like this conflict to get resolved?”, and “What compromise or understanding would breed good will and lasting peace between me and them?” Dr. Stephen Covey advises that these questions will guide you in regulating your emotions, choosing your words, the tone of your voice, and pursuing effective pathways to resolution – instead of knee-jerk, angry or inflammatory responses that serve to sabotage the likelihood of successful conflict resolution.

#### **Principle 5 – Instead of the “Eye-for-an-eye” response to conflicts, apply the “Golden Rule”**

While it is natural to retaliate against people who hurt you or your feelings, this prompts them to do the same, escalating the conflict and instilling even deeper resentments. This relates to your instinctive “quest for fairness”, and to cause the same hurt visited upon you. Recalling Roosevelt’s words (nobody can put you down without your consent) will protect you from taking harsh treatment personally and getting baited into an escalating conflict. Ask yourself, “If I did what this person did to me, how would I like to be treated by them?” Even if they confront you, you would want to feel they *respected* you as a person – and that should be your guide for how to approach the situation.

#### **Principle 6 – There is no such thing as “winning” an argument, especially with loved ones**

In competitions or contests, the goal IS to win or beat the opponent. Outside of this, personal or business relationships should not be competitions. In relationships, the goal should be to resolve conflicts with mutually satisfying (win-win) outcomes. Compromise and collaboration facilitate lasting agreements and avoid resentments and later attempts to “get even” by the “loser”. Efforts to win, be *right* or to exact justice in arguments will force you into a win-lose/right-wrong argument, where BOTH parties end up losing – possibly even the entire relationship.

#### **Principle 7 – Treat the offending person as an *ally*, not an adversary**

Izzy Kalman wisely notes that if you launch an attack on a person with whom you are upset, they will see you as an enemy to be thwarted, and therefore get defensive, shut you down, or even launch their own counter-attack (eye-for-an-eye response). Try to find the positive intention of their behavior, even if it didn’t come across that way. Viewing an overprotective parent as only trying to help the teen avoid danger may enable the teen to acknowledge their intention, and then to work on solutions that both enable the teen to have more freedom while still achieving their common interests (safety). Screaming at that parent sets them up as an adversary, and likely causes parents to double down on their position – and may serve as evidence of their suspicion that the child cannot handle the freedom they seek.

#### **Principle 8 – Seek to understand before trying to be understood**

Dr. Stephen Covey once said, “The deepest hunger of the human soul is to be understood”. Most arguments go nowhere or even escalate because both sides (engaged in a win-lose conflict dynamic) shut out the other’s

message. Instead, they only half-listen while they search for a way to reassert their point of view or persuade the other to agree with them. A good way to break out of that pattern is to pause the argument – then each can take turns describing in their *own* words the *other* person’s point or concern. This gives them the chance to feel understood, and perhaps to correct any misunderstanding the other may have. This exercise forces them to listen more carefully to the other side, and perhaps even empathize with them. The acronym PEAS can help you remember how to respond to someone with whom you are having a difficult argument:

P = Paraphrase their point (“It sounds like you’re saying...”, “In other words....”)

E = Empathize with how they must feel (“I can see how you might feel that way”, “That must be frustrating”)

A = Appreciate their feedback (“Thanks for letting me know that”, “I appreciate your feedback”)

S = Share your perspective (“Here’s my take on this...”, “My observation is...”)

So, remember to use your PEAS!

### **Principle 9 – Never underestimate the power of a sincere apology**

We all make mistakes, and sometimes those mistakes hurt people in our lives. When we hurt someone, it violates the implicit contract we share with each other – the assumed understanding that we don’t mean to harm each other. Breaking that contract requires steps toward addressing the (typically) unintended harm we caused. Saying you’re sorry usually is not enough to reassure the other person that you did not mean to hurt, nor ever plan to hurt them again. That implicit assumption or trust that they once had has been shaken or broken and needs to heal for the relationship to weather the storm. Fortunately, psychologists have studied what makes for an effective apology that starts the process of re-building that trust. Effective apologies should include these key ingredients to begin the healing process:

1. Start your apology by acknowledging your wrong-doing;
2. Say why you did it, while still taking responsibility for your mistake or role;
3. Comment on how this must have felt to them (showing empathy);
4. Say what you wish you had done differently (showing you understand the right thing to do);
5. Say why you value your relationship with that person (i.e., why you want to make amends); and
6. Propose corrective action you will take to ensure you won’t keep hurting them the same way again.

Sincere apologies reflect an attempt to “re-negotiate the implicit contract” with someone – and to make a new “promise” that you plan to *keep* going forward. Asking their forgiveness involves asking them to trust your commitment to keep that promise. Remember, saying you are sorry is not the *end* of the apology, it’s just the *beginning*. Instead of permanently severing a good relationship, making an effective apology – and then consistently treating them respectfully – can often make that relationship stronger over time than ever before!

### **Principle 10 – When someone who hurt you shows their sincere commitment to change, forgive them (in stages)!**

When someone violates your trust or confidence, it’s understandably hard to trust them again. Questions come to mind about whether you misplaced your trust in a person capable of hurting you in the way they did. If, on the other hand, they make a credible apology, you must decide whether you can take the “risk” of letting them hurt you again. This very personal decision (you may have good reason to never trust them again), once made, should take time to bear out the truth of their intentions to change their behavior. This trust should come in stages, a little at a time, especially in the months that follow the apology. In other words, trust, but verify. Give them a chance to *prove* themselves gradually over time, and praise any positive changes you experience with them (we all like to get praise for our efforts).