

Making Conflict Work for You

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Abstract

Some of us avoid it, some of us relish it, what is it? Conflict! Learn to identify the different ways people respond to conflict using role playing and identifying the role each person plays.

Résumé

Certains d'entre nous cherchent à les éviter, d'autres y trouvent plaisir. De quoi s'agit-il ? Des conflits ! Apprenez à déterminer les différents types de réaction des gens face aux conflits, grâce à des jeux de rôles, et à cerner le rôle joué par chaque personne.

The Situation

All of us at one time or another have had a misunderstanding, argument or fight with a family member, friend or co-worker. Life has a way of creating these encounters, mainly because we don't truly listen to each other.

During these encounters we play one of three roles: the victim, the villain or the hero. In the book *Joy of Conflict Resolution, Transforming Victims, Villains, and Heroes in the Workplace and at Home*, author Gary Harper identifies these roles and our actions during times of conflict as a "drama triangle."¹

Victims often see themselves as powerless, wronged and above all, innocent. They absolve themselves of any responsibility for the conflict. Often victims trade their "personal power for sympathy and ironically increase the very stress and negatively they seek to avoid."¹

The hero is a victim that "can't take no more," as we often heard Popeye the Sailor say on Saturday mornings. We turn into the hero to right the wrong against us, defend our interests and to even the score. If you look at actions alone, the hero is a "self-righteous villain."¹ When we become the hero for others, we perpetuate the helplessness of the victim and entrench the other person involved as the villain.

The villain is usually seen as the hateful, envious, snaggle-toothed bad guy! They are petty, mean-spirited and vindictive. They are also patient, creative, ingenious and have an enormous amount of perseverance.

As we stay in this "drama triangle", we entrench ourselves and the other person in these roles. We need to let go of these roles because they are a lose-lose propo-

sition. The victim/hero may feel like they won the battle, but the villain usually will not take it lying down and the conflict either escalates into full-fledged war or a continuation of the battles. Who wants to live like that?

The Solution

We need to lose the victim, hero and villain personas. Victims need to take responsibility for their feelings and needs. Heroes have to stop trying to protect and let go of winning at all costs. We should focus instead on ways to get our needs met by "standing up for ourselves in a way that doesn't knock the other person down."¹ Villains have to relinquish the need to control and be right all the time! When we do this we "make room for fresh and creative possibilities to resolve conflicts and redefine our relationships."¹

Is this easy? By no means! It involves a major shift in thinking by both parties involved. We often think to ourselves, "If they would just see reason," or "I wish they would straighten up!" The crazy thing is, they are probably thinking the same thing. By letting go of these roles, concentrating on the problem and forgiving the people, we build a supportive and collaborative environment versus an aggressive, cutthroat environment.

Meet people in the middle. Each of us giving a little creates what Gary Harper calls the "circle of resolution."¹ This doesn't mean we split the difference; it means we each tell our story and listen to their story with curiosity. This understanding provides the bridge to exit the drama triangle and enter the circle of resolution.

Things that Influenced Us

Where did we learn to be the victim, hero or villain? EARLY! During our childhood, we learn that victims are viewed as innocent bystanders that have been taken advantage of by villains. We see the judgment cast upon the villains and the sympathy garnered by the victim. We judge who is right and overlook the real issue of the conflict. The villain is always wrong... right?! Let's look at some of the lessons learned from childhood and the basic need that is being trampled upon when conflicts arise.

Independence – we need to feel some control over

what we do and our environment. By being told what we have to do, how to do it and what to think about it, we resort to thinking “who died and left you in charge?” When this happens, you’ll see people taking hold of little issues and making a stand because they believe it will be the only thing they can win.

Belonging – you are not invited to the party or the club! This is a basic human need, being wanted. When we perceive we are not wanted, it hurts. Not being invited to the party causes more “us verses them” thinking than anything else. Asking for input, asking them to be involved or even just sending them the “news-letter” is better than finding out about it at the water cooler!

Recognition – most of us value being recognized for a job well done as a close second to being paid well. This can often be confused with fairness. When someone is treated differently (as we perceive it) it may look like that person is receiving special treatment—why is SHE so special? ”Recognition as an individual often underlies disputes over money, rules, and resources. If we feel we get the short end of things, we fear we are not valued.”¹

When we are in the middle of the conflict, it is very hard to see the true reason for feeling upset and/or angry or, (if you are the villain), why the other person is upset/angry. Take a step back and ask:

- “What is this really about?”¹
- “What is this person feeling?”¹

The answers can assist in getting to the root of the conflict. Did I take away their chance to contribute, or forget to invite them to the club, or fail to recognize them for their contribution? All these behaviors make sense when we apply them to the drama triangle.

Conflict resolution starts with all sides getting to tell their story, and listening at a deeper level. Often the repeat of an uprising over petty issues is an indication that a significant symptom hasn’t been discovered. If we stay curious and allow people their “one minute”, we take great strides in getting to the real problem.

The tools we need to develop to turn a conflict into a chance to express thoughts and feelings, and to turn a problem into a growth opportunity for all parties involved, are:

1. Bring along your: bravery, honesty, curiosity, compromise, desire to help, ears to listen
2. The use of “I” statements are a good start for approaching a conflict.

I feel _____ frustrated, upset, angry
 When _____ dictated to, bossed around
 Because _____ it feels like
 I need/want _____ to feel a part of the team.

3. Things to leave at home: anger, hurt feelings, righteousness, pointer finger, insecurity.

Strategies to Defuse Anger

1. Give them their minute.
 - Put your story and judgments temporarily aside so we may listen more deeply.
 - Silence is golden – allow them to vent their emotion.
 - Face them with proper body language – avoid crossing your arms or placing your hands on your hips. Do make eye contact and nod appropriately.
 - Listen without interruption, unless asked a specific question.
 - Set ground rules – don’t have to tolerate being sworn at or called names. “I can see you are angry. I’m not willing to be sworn at.” Or, “Cool it with the personal attacks. Give me exactly what happened.”¹
2. Create Speed Bumps – short interjections (1 - 2 seconds) that connect you with the person and to break their momentum.
 - Restate key words – slows them down and encourages them to elaborate their concerns.
 - Say their name – Nancy, NANCY! This is especially good if someone is reaching a crisis point.
3. Show Empathy – understanding and acknowledgement
 “I can understand how hard your job is...”
4. Validate Experience – acknowledges that a person’s anger is normal and understandable under the circumstances. This focus can reduce the other person’s feelings of disconnection and demonstrate our understanding of their situation.
 “I don’t blame you for being mad. It is understandable that your frustration level is high.”
5. Ask Open-ended Questions – ask specific questions – “What is causing you the most grief? What exactly happened?”
6. Reframe Focus on Unmet Needs – find out exactly “when the knife went in.”¹ At what point did their needs go unmet?

7. Summarize the Big Picture – pulls together our understanding of the other person's story

Focus on the highlights of the story and invite clarification if a point is missed.

How to Avoid Conflict from the Start!

Steps to collaboration

1. Setting the Stage – how are we going to approach this? “Name the Elephant.” We all know why we are meeting. Name the elephant and watch the tension ease out of the room. This sets the stage for calm and rational discussion.
2. Sharing our stories – how do we see the situation? We all perceive things differently. Allow each person to state their version of the problem.
3. Creating an agenda – what do we need to discuss in order to resolve the conflict? Stick to the fact of the problem, separate the people from the problem and go hard on the problem.

4. Exploring interests and needs – what do we each need in order to bring about a solution? Uncover the interests and needs underlying the positions that lock us into confrontation. Use open-ended questions, maintain your curiosity and share your needs, feelings and perspectives. This helps to establish and understand the emotions involved in the conflict.

5. Solving the problem – what are our options and who will do what by when? Agreeing to a certain time frame, with a follow-up, ensures that the person will work on the problem. If we don't agree to meet again and see how things are working out, there is no feedback, positive or negative, so why bother. Perhaps the options first discussed are still not meeting the needs of the people involved.

References and Excellent Books to Read

1. Harper, Gary: *The Joy of Conflict Resolution*
2. Parry, Danaan: *Warriors of the Heart*
3. Carson, Richard D: *Taming Your Gremlin*
4. Scott, Susan: *Fierce Conversations*