

Dealing With Conflict

TURNING CONFLICT TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

12 rules to help you conquer life's daily battles.

Everywhere you turn, the potential for conflict exists. Conflict with ourselves (Should I get up and exercise, or sleep in? Should I have this piece of dessert?); conflict with others (I was waiting for that parking place. That flight attendant was rude.); conflict at work (Why is the project over-budget and late? That's not my job!); conflict at home (Eat your vegetables! Why can't I go to the dance tonight?)

Conflict is neither good nor bad—it just is. And what it is is a word derived from the Latin word "conflictus" (the act of striking together) and is defined as:

a: competitive or opposing action of incompatibles: antagonistic state or action (as of divergent ideas, interests, or persons)

b: mental struggle resulting from incompatible or opposing needs, drives, wishes, or external or internal demands

No matter how you define conflict, the reality is that it's a part of life. What is important is that you recognize and deal with it appropriately. You can either let conflict or the potential for conflict drag you down or you can use it to lift you to new levels of performance. Understanding what conflict is and why it exists helps shape your response.

Conflict generally results from poor communications, disruptions in routines, unclear goals or expectations, the quest for power, ego massage, differences in value systems, or hidden agendas. It finds its expression in rude, discourteous and sometimes hostile behavior; selfishness; strident and defensive language; lack of respect; and increased stress.

So now that you see what it looks like, what do you do with it when it occurs? Following are some guidelines that will help you deal with conflict:

1. **Ground yourself.** When lightning strikes, lightning rods take the electrical current and run it harmlessly to the ground. So, too, can you take the jolts and divert them harmlessly away if you have a well-constructed foundation of core values that you adhere to. Having designed a personal mission statement that clearly articulates who you are and where you are going will help provide guidance and direction before the conflict even occurs. The old country song says it best, "If you don't stand for something, then you'll fall for anything."
2. **Look for warning signs.** Be in touch with who you are. Part of handling conflict is to be aware of your own personal strengths and weaknesses, your beliefs and perceptions and how they shape your response. For instance, if you perpetually run behind and you've got an important date, leave a little earlier than normal so that if you encounter traffic, you won't lose your cool and overreact. Build "fluff" into schedules. Likewise, set realistic deadlines for yourself and others.
3. **Stay in control.** Recognize that when you're dealing with people, not everyone will live up to your expectations all of the time. Reframe the stressful situation to keep your composure. Instead of overreacting when someone cuts you off on your morning commute, look for opportunities to be "nice" and let someone cut in front of you. Don't sink to their level. When you lie down with dogs you get fleas.
4. **Keep a positive outlook.** If you expect good things to happen, they will. Conversely, if you expect bad things to happen, you better believe you won't be disappointed. Your attitude will govern your response.

5. **Maintain a sense of humor.** Learn to laugh—harder and more frequently. Remember how hysterically upset some people can get and how comical it is. Don't let your boorish behavior provide comic relief for someone else. Laugh it off.
6. **Establish ground rules.** When conflict happens, set goals for how to resolve it. What would happen if we don't fix this? What would a successful resolution look like? Look for common ground. Keep focused on a positive, solution-based outcome. Perhaps the only thing you can agree on is to agree to disagree, but do it in an agreeable manner.
7. **Drill down to the roots.** Try to find the cause of the disease instead of just treating the symptoms. What is causing the conflict and why are you reacting the way you are? Everyone involved in the conflict needs to agree on a definition of the problem before the problem can be tackled. This could mean describing the problem in terms of each person's needs. There's an old saying that a problem well defined is already half solved.
8. **Think win-win.** In conflict, one party does not have to win and the other lose. Sometimes disagreement will lead to a more effective solution. Sometimes a good decision is reached when everyone has to give a little. To change is not to lose your own identity. As a matter of fact, by changing you find yourself. And you find others. The only way to find a solution that benefits all sides is to learn more about each other. Beats a power struggle any day.
9. **Eliminate emotions.** Separate your feelings from the problem. When your emotions get mixed up in the conflict, the outcome is in doubt. Emotions color your perceptions and your logic and cloud the rational thinking that is essential to arriving at a solution.
10. **Brainstorm.** There might be a variety of solutions if everyone is focused on a positive outcome and engaged in the process. Challenge yourself and others to be creative about the possibilities available to you.
11. **Concentrate on what you can control.** What should you take ownership of and fix? What falls under your sphere of influence? What impact will you have on the desired outcome? Learn to focus your attention and activities, where you can make a difference. Don't get caught up in areas beyond your control. You've got to learn to let go of those.
12. **Take action.** Once you've arrived at a win-win solution, accept it and implement it. Don't second-guess. Make sure each person takes responsibility for agreeing with the decision.

When we accept and understand conflict, we allow ourselves to grow, change, and to be empowered.