

# Respectful Communication



## RESOLVE CONFLICT

### Conflict Is Inevitable

Conflict is a natural occurrence based on the way we are socially organized. Our lives are subject to situations and personalities that give rise to differing beliefs, values, feelings, and behaviours.

Daily our competing motives / priorities put us at odds with others, whether friends, partners, family, colleagues, superiors, subordinates, clients or customers. Personal and professional relationships that would be described as being healthy also experience conflict. In fact, key elements that make such relationships healthy are the collective abilities and willingness of individuals to manage and resolve conflict.

Unmistakable signs that individuals are experiencing some degree of conflict are - they have ceased having any real communication with each other, or their communication has become harsh and aggressive, or defensive and disrespectful. They cannot resolve their conflict with one another unless they attempt to change the nature of their mutual communication, however painful that initiation may appear to be.

### Obstacles To Initiating Communication

Unwillingness or hesitancy to initiate communication, even on a respectful basis, may result from -

- the reality that one or more of the individuals lack the skills to communicate effectively
- individuals who have learned to avoid conflict, to accommodate or placate others and not to rock the boat
- more volatile individuals who have learned to give it right back, to draw their line in the sand, and prepare to challenge or confront any comment, opinion, or position that they perceive as being contrary.



The confrontation invariably becomes a competition to prove who is right, embracing the themes - *I need to win even if you lose; If I give in, then you will win; We'll both lose and I don't care; If you get what you want then I won't get what I need.*

The ease with which individuals adopt and reinforce negative behaviours represents a sizeable obstacle. For example, individuals may keep detailed mental histories of verbal victories and record others' mistakes or missteps. Witnesses to the conflict are often invited to take sides with one faction or another. Previous conflicts, although seemingly settled, are resurrected at the appropriate time to dislodge the emerging, but still fragile, respectful communication process.

As the Nobel Laureate, psychologist Daniel Kahneman, has pointed out in his research - **we will work two to three times harder when motivated by what we are likely to lose as opposed to what we are likely to gain.** This is why one of the dynamics influencing the process of conflict resolution initially favours those with the negative position. They tend to believe that the required effort to bring about any significant positive change will ultimately be at a cost or personal loss to them.

## Steps To Initiate Respectful Communication

If the individuals are prepared to - temporarily withhold judgment, avoid drawing premature conclusions, trust the process, and honour the goodwill of their colleagues (who are acting in good faith) then the following steps will allow the process to take hold and gather strength. The individuals must -

- acknowledge that there is in fact a conflict(s)
- attempt to effectively assess the nature of the conflict
- be aware of their learned behavioural styles relative to managing conflict
- agree to explore and review what realistic options are available to them
- commit in words and actions to an implementation plan to concretely resolve the conflict
- regularly evaluate what efforts have proven effective and what are the next steps to keep the process moving forward in a focused manner

**Each of these steps requires that all individuals agree to use only communication that is respectful and allows for shared discussion and difficult conversations.**

## A Nonviolent Communication Approach

A simply structured approach that can effectively achieve the individuals' goals is based on Marshall Rosenberg's work on nonviolent communication (NVC). This approach sidelines the negative energy for the most part. While there will be the odd argument, this structure brings the individuals back to the task of staying on topic and focusing on specific observed behaviours by

- framing the conversation into **observations** not evaluations - expressing *what I see or hear from you that causes me concern* without blaming or criticizing
- expressing **feelings** - *when I see/hear you do/say* (in relation to my observations), *I feel* (personal emotional / behavioural responses to these observations).
- stating **needs** - hearing clearly and concretely *what I/you believe I/you need*
- **requesting** not demanding - the specific actions that *I/you would like you/me to take or others to take* to help resolve this matter.

**This NVC model is similar to the communication techniques of active listening, paraphrasing, mirroring, or constructive feedback.**

## Can Anyone Learn NVC?

At first seeming artificial and contrived, the techniques slow down the pace of communication, allowing individuals to explore alternate ways of expressing their feelings and needs, while actively listening without judgments, personalization, and negativity. Anyone can learn and practice these approaches and having a third party observer for feedback and clarification enhances the overall process.

Having an active and optimistic view of the external world brings its challenges. Viewing interpersonal conflicts as one of these challenges, allows individuals to distance themselves from a primary focus on loss or harm to one of potential benefit derived from successful conflict resolution.

**Good problem solving & conflict resolution skills provides a genuine sense of self-efficacy. Effectively practiced, they can be instrumental in turning debilitating distress into challenging opportunities.**