

# Difficult Conversations – How to make them less Confrontational

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In recent years, our firm has been asked to provide more and more training in the area of conflict management. Within these training sessions, we have noted that many of the participants expressed a real and palpable adversity to undertaking a difficult conversation as a means of initiating conflict resolution. This article will provide some valuable tools on how to initiate a difficult conversation and in turn how to respond to someone who initiates a difficult conversation regarding a conflictual situation.

Conveying good news and positive conversations are easy. But anyone having to confront someone with bad news and an uncomfortable conversation typically feels anxious and stressed. As a practicing mediator, I believe the reason for this is our preconceived notion of how it will be received by the other party and that we will be unable to broach a difficult subject in a conflict competent way. We often revert to basic behaviours when it comes to dealing with conflict, which often entails accusatory posturing with a smattering of verbal insults. And with this aggressive stance, the other party retaliates in kind with the same reaction. As escalation unfolds with its emotional investment the conflict becomes more difficult to resolve and we know that two (2) wrongs don't make a right. The conflict is exacerbated. In the mediation

world, one of our idioms is that a negative approach to conflict management results in a negative outcome.

The other aspect of conflict management that typically aggravates the situation is the lack of productive and problem-solving communications between the feuding parties. Once the blowout is over, it is quite commonplace for the parties to resort to a silent treatment, which breeds further contempt between the disputants. Moreover, time in many entrenched conflict is not the healer. In fact, it is quite the opposite. With time, positions become polarized and it became harder for the parties to move from their respective positions given their investment of time and effort in digging their proverbial trenches.

Conflict competency is a term we use to describe an approach to deal with conflict in a more productive and positive manner. A conflict competent individual can see beyond the negativity attached to conflict and is better equipped to diffuse conflict by employing some fundamental tactics in deescalating disputes in a contemporaneous fashion. Rather than letting time waste away, the conflict competent person will deal with the other party in a timely fashion and employ a language (both verbal and non-verbal) that promotes problem-solving and ultimately mutual resolution.

As indicated earlier, a positive approach to conflict management generally results in a more positive outcome. A conflict competent individual will invite the other party to engage in a conversation without the use of derogatory or inflammatory language. The approach is one where the initiator takes

ownership of her/his feelings vis-à-vis the conflict while inviting the other party to fully express his/her thoughts and feelings. The conflict competent person supportively listens and questions openly to genuinely understand why there is a conflict between them.

Conflict competency does not entail being submissive... in fact, it is quite the opposite. It promotes the idea of being assertive in expressing thoughts and feeling, but also equally important, in enquiring about the other side's thoughts and feelings. The use of the word "you" is used less frequently since it implies directing fault to the other party in the dispute. Conflict competency also takes into consideration that there is no one completely innocent in the dispute – which in fact, both parties share in the creation of the conflict and therefore must share in its resolution. The old adage that it "takes two tango" really does apply when diagnosing a conflict. It is very rare that one party is completely innocent and the other is 100% at fault. The conflict competent person can look beyond the "blame game" while understanding one's contribution to the conflict and attempts to fashion a settlement based on a mutual undertaking by both parties to achieve a lasting resolution. Conflict competency requires the use of empathy and acknowledgement, as well as awareness as to the destructive nature of an unchecked conflict.

Conflict competency is not something that we are born with; however, it can be learned. It requires a paradigm shift in the manner, in which we see conflict and react to it. It necessitates a change in viewing conflict management in a more proactive light. Recognizing that conflict is inevitable, one must also come to recognize that the way we manage conflict

determines the ultimate outcome. A more proactive and civil approach to conflict management will breed a more profound and lasting resolution, which is something that most people want to achieve for a peaceful co-existence.