

# **Managing Conflict**

**Gerri King, Ph.D.**

On-going conflict is rarely about the issue being discussed; more often it's about how the conversation is being handled. Within minutes it's not unusual for someone to say "You're not listening to me" or "You always talk to me like that." Once that happens, there is then conflict about the conflict which is much more apt to produce emotional stress and linger in our minds, hearts, and memories.

To avoid this unnecessary situation, it is essential to reduce miscommunication by increasing our listening and responding skills. More importantly, whenever there is an opportunity, we should share what we know about our individual styles of communication, conflict resolution, and stress reaction.

If we truly understand other people's styles, we are less likely to take responses personally; to project what we would be thinking or feeling if we used that style; and to hang on to difficult interchanges in a way that affects future interaction.

Conflicts are rarely meant as personal attacks, but human nature is such that most of us tend to personalize them anyway. Of course when a person says "Don't take this personally," it's for sure going to be personal, but most of the time it isn't. It therefore behooves us to find ways to hear what's behind the words and emotion.

## **The Dynamics of Conflict**

Conflict can be scary due to issues of abandonment, danger, and fear of the unknown. Notice how upsetting a conflictual conversation can be even when it's with people with whom we do not have important or lasting relationships. Almost every conflict reminds us of other disagreements and has a distancing and isolating effect.

Conflict is often experienced as threatening to our self-perception and identity. In other words, "You are not just upset about this issue; you may also not like me."

The process of handling conflict is often gender, peer, and sub-culturally specific. Our conflict management styles have been refined over time by our temperaments,

how we were socialized, the models in our lives, and our particular roles in our families or social structure. Even the decision to act differently from what we observed is influenced by our reaction to our own upbringing.

### **Myths Associated With Conflict**

**Myth 1.** Conflict is inherently negative. On the contrary. Without conflict we wouldn't get anywhere: we wouldn't be creative or inventive, make necessary changes, or experience progress. Conflict is not negative. How it's handled can be.

**Myth 2.** There just shouldn't be any conflicts! Although most of us would say "Of course conflict is normal and necessary!," we are usually shocked or uncomfortable during times of disagreement. Our culture works hard at teaching us that conflict is normal, but then refuses to help us recognize the emotions that accompany conflict and the need to address them as well.

**Myth 3.** You can force people to change their values. Values can't be changed by force, and the only way behavior can be changed by force is if the person cares about the consequences. If we want values to change, we need the patience to listen and educate, and the time to help others through the change process.

The reason that values do not change easily is that each value is tied to every other. Even when there appears to be an excellent reason for someone to alter a value-laden point of view, their response is often: "If I'm not right about this value, maybe the other values I hold dear also have to change, and I'm not ready to do that."

**Myth 4.** Resolution styles are usually compatible. More often than not, communication styles are different. We tend to assume we are all compatible and that others are feeling the way we would be feeling in the same situation. Because that's generally not the case, the conflict becomes even more intense. We can lessen the problem by sharing stylistic differences and checking out what people mean to say.

**Myth 5.** People who are close to each other know what each other is experiencing. The assumption that people should empathize with our position is presumptive. Unfortunately, the closer we are to another person, the more we expect them to guess correctly our point of view or emotional state. If we truly want people to know, we need to tell them in as straightforward a manner as possible. Of course, we still run the risk that they won't respond the way we'd like, but at least we've given them a fair chance.

**Myth 6.** We know our own body language intimately. 65%-85% of our communication is in the form of body language. This is an extraordinary statistic dramatized by the fact that we have little idea what our own body language looks like to others.

This means that everyone who encounters you knows more about your body language than you do. Though it's impossible to constantly monitor the way you move your body, you can be assured that your body language is OK if you make sure you're thinking and saying the same thing. In other words, it'll be a dead giveaway if you're thinking someone is not nice but you're telling them that they are.

Nevertheless, body language is so complicated that you should perpetuate a safe environment that allows people to ask: "Are you angry with me?" This is far better than people walking away thinking that you're angry with them when you might have only been preoccupied or upset with yourself about something.

**Myth 7.** Little things are too petty to spend time addressing. If there is conflict about a so-called "little thing," it is probably representative of something much bigger. I have consulted in organizations where the employees were very upset about the copy machine being moved. It wasn't the copy machine, but the fact that it represented change. Employees actually saw it as a precursor to yet another down-sizing. Similarly, a dictate about schedules may be viewed as disempowering or not trusting. Whatever the "vehicle" for conflict, it is worth

addressing in the event it is representative of a far more important issue.

**Myth 8.** We have far too much to do to spend the time dealing with every issue and conflict that arises. The next time you ask if you have time to address an issue, ask also if you have time not to -- time taken now will save a great deal of time down the road. Putting off a discussion builds resentment and may lead to far more dramatic and complex reactions. It's really a matter of where you want to put the time. The general guideline is: the sooner the better.

