

## Tips for Managing Conflict

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Creative Metrics' research has identified behaviors that lead to *constructive outcomes* of conflict – stronger relationships, creative solutions, better solutions for the company, and more confidence that challenges can be successfully met. The six principles of conflict resolution are to affiliate, empathize, engage, own, self restrain, and build trust. These principles and guidance for putting them into practice are discussed below.

### Affiliate (Don't Alienate)

- Convey that you are not a threat to the person and want to join with them in coming to a fair resolution of the problem.
- Treat the other person respectfully, just as you would want to be treated.
- Focus on what you like about this person.
- Be authentic. Don't be overly friendly or you may be seen as false.
- Don't lose your temper and say things you don't mean.
- Be aware that what you regard as acceptable may be offensive to someone else. Be mindful of their values and expectations.

### Empathize (Don't Egoize)

- Empathy means accurately understanding another's point of view and having the ability to communicate this to the other person. Thus empathy is not just understanding someone else but also being able to let them know you truly understand them.
- To egoize means to communicate only your point of view without attempting to really consider the thoughts and feelings of another. Examples of egoize are; not listening, evaluating the other person, giving advice, giving sermons, or simply only being interested in your own point of view.
- Consider the other person's work environment – their organization and team, their past, their pressures, their goals and vision, their wins and their losses.
- To have empathy means not only knowing what the person thinks but how important it is to them.
- The best way to practice empathy is to listen first. Let the other person have their say and then paraphrase for them what you heard. This way they can correct you if you got it wrong. After you are convinced that not only do you understand their position, but more importantly, they feel you understand their position and its importance, should you offer your views.
- Also of importance is that you believe the other person understands your point of view. Ask them questions until you are satisfied that they really understand you.
- To have real empathy, the other person's point of view must make sense to you. This means that even though you might not agree, you do understand why they think and feel as they do. Ask yourself, "Why does what looks so wrong to me, look so right to them?" When you can answer this question you have empathy.



### Engage (Don't Avoid)

- Engagement is a commitment to dialogue and an outcome.
- Engagement means action. This is different from empathy, which means understanding. When you engage, you are committing to some type of action to resolve the issue.
- To engage means to openly admit the problem exists. Many individuals are so avoidant of conflict that they find all sorts of ways to deny that there really is a problem. If you catch yourself making excuses for the problem then you are probably avoiding the issue.
- Oftentimes it takes courage to engage because we have to face many of our fears—fears that we are wrong, fears that we will lose, or fears that we may be rejected. To build courage, visualize having a conversation about the issue with the other person before actually doing it.
- Timing is critical to engaging. Getting into a dialogue before people are ready is often counterproductive. Making an appointment can be useful with all parties knowing the agenda for the meeting. This gives people a chance to prepare and helps them engage in the problem solving.
- It is also important not to engage too late in an issue. People are often so reluctant to bring up an issue that they wait too long to approach the other person. This makes it seem like past history and the other person may have long ago forgotten the details or the importance of the issue.
- It is also important not to engage in an issue if the other person is dealing with some much bigger issues. If this is the case, your our issue will seem trivial and a bother to them. For the conversation to be productive, each person must be ready to engage in dialogue. This is often difficult because you want to get it out and get on with it. The other person must also be willing.
- Lastly, be sensitive to communication skills. Use “I” statements whenever possible. Watch your body language. Try not to engage when you are angry.

### Own (Don't Blame)

- To own is to honestly consider how you contributed to the problem. If you believe that someone else is totally to blame for a problem you probably do not have a good picture of the entire system and the contributors.
- The world is very complex and it is important that you see how you are part of the problem without feeling the need to blame yourself. Ask yourself, “What did I contribute—good and bad?”
- Ask someone else how they think you may have contributed to the problem. Don't let them excuse your behavior and blame the other. This is not helpful.
- Ask yourself where are you at the extremes on issues. If you find yourself believing far in one direction away from the others this is probably a good area for you to explore and a difficult one because you probably feel strongly about it.
- Ask yourself what it is that you often don't see about yourself. Where are your blind spots? Everyone has some and they tend to stay with us and color many issues.
- Ask yourself what it is that others don't see about you. People have to know you to understand you.
- Don't take blame for everything. Only rarely is one person wholly responsible. And don't take blame for so much of the issue that you neglect to hold others accountable.
- Don't sulk or stew over your failures. Learn from them and move on. Let go of your misery and hold on to the lessons. We all make mistakes.



### Self-Restrain (Don't Emote)

- Follow grandma's rule. Take a deep breath and count to ten. This is more effective than you might guess.
- Give yourself time to calm down. Take a walk. Physical activity is a great stress reducer.
- Talk to yourself. Self-talk can be a great calmer. Look for ways you contributed to the problem as a way to diffuse your anger.
- Be aware of your emotional responses. Maybe your words are calm but your body language is threatening.
- The non-verbals are very important. Watch for sighing, rolled eyes, furled brow, turning away, sitting behind your desk, avoiding or having very intense eye contact. All of these signal your emotion.
- Know the tolerance level for emotion of the person you are with. Some people handle emotionality much easier than others.
- Don't hide all your emotions. You must show enough emotions to be consistent with the importance of the issue or you will be seen as someone who doesn't care. Showing no emotion can be just as bad as showing too much emotion.
- Yelling is almost never helpful. It may make you feel better but everyone around you will feel worse and avoid you.
- Do a particularly vigorous physical workout. Sometimes this is the best way to release tension. Executives who work-out consistently often speak of how it improves their performance at work.

### Build Trust (not Distrust)

- The main purpose of building trust is so both parties know there will be integrity in the resolution of the conflict. Most executives believe that they do not always have to get their way as long as they know there was honesty and integrity in the discussion and resulting decisions. Trust is always based upon a relationship and a "gut" feeling. So to build trust, you must build a relationship. (It is an interesting debate whether to trust someone you do not know until they do something that destroys the trust)
- To build trust you must find something in common with the person. The human experience suggests we will all have something in common. Interests, hobbies, travel, knowledge, etc. You must get to know more of the whole person. Learn about their family, their school, their career interests, what they read.
- Be self-disclosing about yourself. Psychological research shows that transparency begets transparency. In other words, if you are open with someone else they tend to be open with you as well. Telling others what's important to you and finding out what is important to them builds trust. Telling something personal can set the whole stage. I remember an executive who told me about a time he was walking into a meeting to deal with an important and difficult issue. As they were entering the building he remarked about the petunias growing in the landscaping and how they reminded him of his family and the cabin they spent holidays at. This set the whole tone for the meeting. To get to know someone tell them of your values, your pressures, and your experiences. Don't tell them about your accomplishments. This difference is very important. The first tells about you as a person, the later is an attempt to establish power.



### Build Trust (not Distrust) *continued*

- You have to be authentic without ulterior motives. If you are trying to establish a relationship so as to “make a sale” of your point of view the other person will see through this instantly. This is the reason car salesmen have such low trust scores on surveys. They act like your best friend but are only interested in the sale.
- Be aware that others may see you as manipulative even when you are trying to be authentic. Being nice is often seen as “ass kissing.” Building trust must be done very carefully.
- Timing is always key. Don’t try to build trust when the other person is upset or angry. Don’t get into the issues too soon.
- Think carefully about the first words you say to the other person. The first words out of your mouth can set the tone for the entire conversation. Be careful and thoughtful.
- In building trust, you are essentially trying to remove a sense of threat. Any time spent relating is time well spent. This is why executives do deals on the golf course. Business people do what works not what’s fun. Doing the deal is the primary motivation.
- Don’t underestimate the power of psychomotor synchronicity—a technical term for walking. Walking together leads to emotional and cognitive synchronicity. A walk and talk is a very powerful tool. This is why leaders often meet offsite where they have a chance to walk.
- Realize your feelings may be different than theirs. Just because you think its going well does not mean they do. President Truman met with Stalin and thought they had gotten along quite well. Stalin on the other hand, thought Truman was just a “farm-boy” and was not impressed with him.
- Acknowledge the power of your past history with the person. Think about how hard it is to build trust and how easy it is to build distrust. As one psychologist noted, “friends come and go but enemies last a lifetime.” If the other person has any reason to distrust you—and this may be based upon something that happened twenty years ago—resolving conflict will be difficult. Most of us underestimate the memories of others when it comes to mistakes or misperceptions people tag on us.
- Acknowledge the power of your reputation. Even people who have never met you have probably heard things about you. Again, some of these incidents may be years or even decades old. People have long memories and some stories last forever. I recall one executive who twenty-two years earlier had fired a lot of employees during a business decline and did not handle the situation particularly well. This reputation continues to follow him to this day even though he has not had to let anyone go in many years.
- It is best to talk about things directly when trying to build trust.

