



CONNECTIONS

Communicating in Culturally Diverse Settings



Volume 4, Issue 4

July 2007

3 Barriers to Conflict Resolution

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Conflict is unavoidable! As long as we share limited space and resources with other human beings, there will be conflict. However, most of these conflicts can be resolved. In previous issues of this newsletter, I identified actions we can take to reduce the incidence of organizational conflict (Managing Conflict: A 10 Step Program, April 2004), and described steps we can take to effectively deal with different conflict situations (3 Steps to Conflict Resolution, October 2005). In this issue, I describe 3 common barriers to the conflict resolution process and identify steps we can take to remove these obstacles. These barriers include strong emotions on part of the conflicting parties that interfere with communication, a lack of commitment to the resolution process by one or both parties, and a failure to understand how the resolution process works.

1. **Strong emotions that interfere with the dialogue process.** Based on my experience as a consultant and a third-party mediator, this is the biggest barrier to successful conflict resolution. Dealing with a conflict is an emotional process. The conflicting parties might feel angry, frustrated, sad or anxious at various times during this process. Unfortunately, these emotions can also interfere with the dialogue needed to successfully resolve a conflict. There are two steps you can take to overcome this obstacle. First, acknowledge the emotional elements of the conflict. How are you and the other person feeling? What emotions are each of you experiencing? Always remember, to successfully resolve a conflict, you must consider how the other person feels about the situation. Second, identify your emotional triggers. What sets you off? What makes you angry or gets you frus-

trated? How do you respond to others in these situations (i.e., some people deal with their emotions more effectively than others)? If you can clearly identify your triggers, you can work to avoid those situations where your emotions can get out of hand and negatively affect the dialogue process.

2. **A lack of commitment to the resolution process.** This is another common barrier. Many people would rather avoid a conflict than try to deal with the problem. As discussed previously, conflict often creates fear and anxiety in the conflicting parties, and most people want to avoid these emotions. One way to overcome this hurdle is to identify the positive outcomes of successful conflict resolution. This can motivate you and the other party to come to a mutually beneficial solution. Some common benefits include improved communication and

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interaction, increased understanding, enhanced creativity, improved work processes and a better work product. But the greatest potential benefit is the opportunity to get what you are seeking if the resolution process is successful. An outcome that is often unattainable if you avoid the conflict.

3. **A lack of understanding of how the conflict resolution process works.** Few people truly understand the steps necessary to successfully resolve a conflict. For example, in order to resolve most conflicts, the parties need to *collaborate*. They must make a good faith effort to work together to find common ground that can lead to a mutually beneficial solution. People often believe they are behaving in a collaborative manner when, in reality, they are not. So in order to resolve a conflict, the parties must understand what collaborative behavior really looks like. This lack of understanding is another reason many people avoid conflict. They just don't know what to do. The most effective way to overcome this barrier is to participate in conflict reso-

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lution training that gives you a chance to learn the steps to effective resolution and practice applying those steps. In fact, I recommend organizations provide this training to all members. In the absence of such training, try to familiarize yourself with the resolution process before you deal with a conflict. The method I have developed includes 3 steps (see the October 2005 issue for a more detailed description of this process): understand the true cause of the conflict, understand the intensity of the conflict (importance of the conflict to each party and how flexible each is willing to be), and engage in collaborative behaviors to find a mutually satisfying outcome.

TIPS Booklets

Using a concise, easily scannable format, these affordable 20-page guides offer detailed tips, tools and techniques you can use to immediately improve your performance. The following booklets are available:

- **50 Ways to Reduce Bias and Create a Climate for Diversity.**
- **50 Tips for Improving Communication in Culturally Diverse Settings.**
- **50 Tips for Managing and Resolving Conflict**
- **50 Ways to Lose Weight Without Dieting.**

Each booklet costs only \$5 plus \$1 shipping and handling. Visit www.doctorholmes.net for ordering information.

About the Author

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