



TRENTON HIGHTOWER

Four conditions help to resolve conflicts

■ *Second of a two-part series on conflict in the workplace.*

By TRENTON HIGHTOWER

Conflict is as natural as the changing of the seasons. It surrounds us in our coming in and our going out — at home, and at work.

But if conflict is such a fact of life, then why do so many of us react to it with aggression, denial and resistance?

Dr. Judith Warner, author of "The Magic of Conflict," says it's because most of us view conflict as something negative to be fought off tooth and nail.

Conflict is not a negative, Dr. Warner says, but a neutral — a natural fact of living in an increasingly complex society where everyone is in high gear, trying to live our lives and get our jobs done.

How it's managed is key.

Secondly, Dr. Warner says, conflict is not a contest to be won or lost. When we stop viewing conflict as a win-or-lose situation, we open the door for win-win solutions.

For this to happen, Dr. Warner concludes that four basic conditions must exist: acknowledgment, acceptance, appreciation and adaptation.

Acknowledgment

People at the center of the conflict have to acknowledge its existence rather than try to avoid or deny it. Plow through the feelings. Get them out on

the table and arrive at consensus.

What's the issue here? As the New Age gurus attest, you've got to name it to claim it.

Acceptance

Conflict presents a problem not because it exists, but because of the need each side has for its own desires and concerns to prevail.

Yes or no. Right or wrong. Win or lose. Fear pushes people into isolation. Instead, work toward facilitating each person's acceptance of his or her involvement in the conflict.

Ask those whose interests are at odds to explain their reasoning. Sometimes, by talking through the interests, it's possible to find unanticipated common ground.

The reality is that while neither "side" will walk away equally satisfied, this approach to conflict resolution increases the chances of both feeling good about the outcome.

Appreciation

To quote authors Roger Fisher and William Ury from their book "Getting to Yes," "Conflict resolution is not about a group of people walking into the sunset holding hands. It's about de-escalating the problems and having everyone feel respected and honored for their contributions."

When people are able to appreciate

(See HIGHTOWER Page 9)

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Curriculum vitae

As Frederick Community College's associate vice president for customized training, Trenton Hightower oversees training for more than 5,000 employees at 75 area companies. Mr. Hightower is on the board for the National Council for Continuing Education and Training, a networking association that keeps community college professionals updated on the latest trends and programming. With a bachelor's in communications/PR and a masters in administration, he maintains his best education was Army basic training at Fort Benning, Ga., home of the Infantry.

Hightower: Resolution

(Continued from 6)

the feelings and viewpoints of all involved without judgment, they've taken the first steps on the path of appreciating one another because of their differences rather than in spite of them.

Adaptation

People involved in a conflict will often assume that there is only one effective way of dealing with the situation. If they are used to using force to get their own way, they will assume that force is the only resolution.

Writers may prefer a less interactive approach, while lawyers may assume legal action is the only option.

Successful conflict resolution

requires that the people involved be open to new ideas that might lead to solutions.

Staff developer Joellen Killion with the Adams school district in North Glenn, Colo., frequently teaches on the subject. Her position is that resolving conflict is really about how to get people to recognize that their interests alone may not necessarily be good for the whole. It's really about self-interest versus the good of the community, she concludes.

Reframe conflict. Learn to see each impasse as an opportunity for personal and professional growth. Over time, you'll master conflict resolution the same way a music student gets to Carnegie Hall — practice.