

Tips to Prevent Conflict from Escalating

As people, it's almost inevitable that we will run into conflict. When it happens, it can damage relationships and ruin bonds. A single bad event can cause a long time friendship to crumble, a romantic relationship to end in an instant and can tear apart family members from each other. As such, it's best that we take caution when it comes to the escalation of conflict.

Identifying the cause of the conflict is the first step, and in this article we will go through several causes of conflict along with tips on how to avoid these causes.

Causes of Conflict

1. Assumptions

It is essential to avoid assuming or telling someone else how they feel before they have had the opportunity to express themselves. This type of behavior typically leads to negative reactions because the chances are that your assumptions are incorrect. It is essential to understand that there may be multiple interpretations of someone's actions. For instance, if a man is shouting, he could be angry, upset, physically hurt, or overjoyed. You cannot be entirely sure until he communicates what is going on.

To prevent unintentionally using this toxic behavior, separate facts from your opinion about the other person. Maintain a neutral tone and describe what you are observing while providing the other person with an opportunity to correct any errors in the interpretation of the facts. Instead of using loaded terms like "shouting" or saying "I know you're angry," which can cause an argument to escalate, use phrases such as "This conversation is getting louder. How are you feeling?"

For example, rather than telling someone that they are repeating themselves, which can be patronizing, use language such as "I have heard the same thing three times, and I'm still not understanding. Can you explain what you mean in a different way?" This approach lets the other person validate that you've correctly understood how they are feeling.

Once the other person confirms that you understand their feelings (such as anger), you can empathize with them. Phrases like "I too would be angry in your position" or "I genuinely understand why you don't feel heard" can create a stronger connection instead of encouraging hostility.

2. Generalizing

Under the influence of a particular venom, you become all-knowing and generalize everything. You may insist that others never listen and that nothing ever gets done on-time. People who generalize pride themselves on their clear rules and black and white thinking.

However, those who see things in shades of gray are more open to new ideas, better problem solvers, and have stronger relationships.

A study by Alistair Ostell and Susan Oakland found that absolutism is inversely correlated with wisdom. The study involved eighty teachers classified as either "absolutist" or "non-absolutist" in their approach towards two work problems. Results showed that the absolutist teachers perceived themselves as less effective at managing their emotions and handling problems. They also had poorer mental and physical health, and found their jobs less pleasant than the open-minded and flexible non-absolutist teachers. The non-absolutist teachers reported finding problem-solving easier and experienced better health.

It is inaccurate to make sweeping generalizations as exceptions always exist. Even an employee who may be consistently tardy may occasionally meet a deadline. Engaging in this type of communication can be problematic as it may cause conflict when someone counters with their own experience. The use of absolutes like "always," "never," and "every," in combination with terms like "you," may exacerbate the situation further. Examples of this language include phrases like "You always know best," "You never take my advice," and "Typical of you to forget something." Utilizing this type of communication can be counterproductive to positive outcomes and may create unnecessary tension.

In the event that someone employs such a toxic tactic against you, it is imperative not to indulge in a similar mindset. Instead, one must identify their sweeping statements as an isolated expression of anger. It is advisable to refrain from engaging with any inciteful remarks and envision them as arrows that miss their intended target, falling harmlessly a few feet away.

Subsequently, the discussion must be redirected to the relevant issue at hand. One may reiterate the importance of resolving the specific matter first, saying, "While there may be broader implications to your statements, can we direct our attention to finding a resolution?". Alternatively, asking for their input on the next course of action, "Thank you for your insight. What do you suggest we do next to address this matter?". Redirecting the conversation to the stated objective can help steer the interaction away from diversion and maintain productivity.

3. Attacking

Attacking someone's identity is a poisonous act. It takes restraint to remain calm when someone attacks you. Name calling and labeling are explicit forms of this poison. Accusations made by association are more cunning and subtle. Other attacks invite us to work out the insult ourselves. People may also be brought in to hammer home the message. Hypothesizing is another tactic attackers may use.

To avoid negativity, change negative characteristics to positive ones. Use "unmotivated" instead of "lazy" and "determination" instead of "stubbornness." Take preemptive action and reinforce the positive aspects of the other person's character. Opt for a positive interpretation to prevent arguments and strengthen the relationship. Focusing on positivity is a sign of a healthy relationship. By using this approach, change your mindset from negative to positive.

People say things they don't mean when they're upset. When someone is yelling at you, they might not mean what they say. Protect yourself and imagine insults bouncing off you. Don't get angry, feel sympathy for the other person. When you're upset, think about why you're criticizing someone else. Don't retaliate, but acknowledge the other person's feelings. Keep your voice neutral and steer the conversation towards the issue at hand. Ask a question or make a statement.

4. Rejecting

Although words may not physically harm us, they can intensify an argument. The words "no" and "but" can be just as impactful as saying them outright, through actions like eye-rolling or storming out. "No" creates a barrier and raises tension, while "but" is a more sophisticated version of rejection. These two words are potent and can be toxic in communication.

When things get heated, avoid using "no" and instead aim for moderate and constructive dialogue. Use "yes...and" instead of "no...but" when responding, which forces a constructive attitude. Start by listing three things you like about the other person's suggestion before addressing things you don't like. This strategy shows that you're open-minded and willing find a solution, while also communicating your priorities. By exploring the pros and cons, you may even find yourself modifying your position.

To avoid getting stuck in a discussion, use questions and suggestions instead of poison. For example, ask "What would make you rethink your view on this?" to get the other person to pause and consider. Making genuine suggestions can also move the discussion forward. However, avoid throwing in unacceptable options or using sarcasm, as this can be toxic. By discovering what lies at the heart of the other person's anger, you can work towards a solution.

5. Defending

Self-defense is an important aspect when being attacked, but it can become problematic if it turns into a self-righteous tantrum. Some common phrases used in this situation include "I'm not trying be difficult," "I'm not disagreeing," "It's not my fault," "I told you so," and "I can't take any more of this."

Instead of playing the blame game, shift your focus. If you find yourself constantly using "I" in a defensive manner, try to concentrate on finding a solution to the disagreement instead of just pinpointing the cause. Keep in mind that this problem may be larger than just the two of you.

To avoid aggravating a defensive person, avoid using the word "you" if you suspect they are pointing a finger at you. Instead, use "I" to take ownership and speak from your personal experience. Keep statements positive to avoid making accusations. If an argument has already started, empathize with the other person and offer partial acceptance of their position. Staying calm is the best way to quickly apologize.

Conflict Can Be Remedied

Conflicts are inevitable. Your aim should not be to please others, but to handle disagreements respectfully and transform them into discussions. With practice, you can identify the type of conflict and use the right approach to resolve it, resulting in candid discussions that are seldom hostile.

Learning how to manage conflict can be beneficial. With the right tools, you can prevent arguments from escalating and find common ground with others. By staying calm, listening actively, rejecting negative words, and defending yourself appropriately, it's possible to navigate disagreements in a constructive way. Conflict provides an opportunity to connect and understand each other better; if we make use of the tips outlined here, we can turn potential confrontations into positive conversations.