

MODULE THREE: KEY LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Module aims:

- To develop and improve your leadership skills.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND MEDIATION SKILLS

Materials provided by mentor Iain Christie and by the Conflict Resolution Centre

What is conflict and how does it arise?

Conflict can be described as any disagreement which people have difficulty in resolving. It can arise as a result of people having different opinions, different objectives or the same or similar objective but different views on how to achieve it. At a deeper level, conflict arises because of the reaction to a perceived or real threat to getting one of our fundamental needs met and our propensity to get into or seek out conflict is related to our internal state of wellness.

What happens when relationships break down?

Any conflict can be a challenge to a relationship, but when conflict becomes serious and protracted it can lead to arguments, non-cooperation, obstruction, sabotage, loss of productivity and emotional and physical harm. Because of the existential nature of the fear of not having a basic need met, reactions to conflict can be extreme including violence or an inability to have any contact with a person with whom we are in conflict.

REFLECTION: Think of a time when you had a serious disagreement with someone. What happened? What were the consequences for the relationship and the wider consequences for yourself or any joint enterprise you were engaged in? Were other people affected?

How do we prevent conflict?

It is not realistic to expect to prevent conflict. Disagreements are inevitable because we all see the world differently, and a certain amount of conflict is therefore normal. What is harmful, however, is for conflict to remain unresolved for a protracted period and steps should be taken to reduce the escalation of conflict and to reduce its impact on those affected by it.

Dealing with difficult situations.

TIP: When a situation arises which could lead to conflict it is important to bear the following points in mind:

- Listen to the other person's point of view first.
- Clarify that you have understood what they are saying correctly by summarising what you have heard.
- Ask how they would like the situation to be resolved and what suggestions they have to take it forward.
- Acknowledge any emotions which may be arising inside you but try not to react to them immediately. If necessary, pause before responding or take a longer break to allow the emotions to settle before responding. Remember to breathe deeply when feeling emotional in order to calm the fight, flight or freeze response.
- When you are ready to respond from an unemotional standpoint, decide how you wish to proceed. State clearly what you wish to achieve and see if there is agreement on the ultimate objective.
- If possible, validate the other person's point of view, and seek to identify what the points of disagreement are between you. Encourage the other person to see the disagreement as a joint problem to be addressed by you both. Do not make it personal and do not take anything said personally. What someone says and the way they say it often says more about them than you.
- Keep the focus on agreeing a process for resolving the conflict and expect it to take some time. The best and most long-lasting solutions will not be reached in a hurry

REFLECTION

Think of a recent disagreement you had with someone. What did you do that made the situation worse? What did you do that made the situation better? What would you do differently next time?

What is mediation?

Mediation is a process for resolving a specific dispute or wider conflict whereby a third person who is neutral to the dispute helps the disputants to express their opinions, explore options for resolution and narrow those options down until agreement is reached on what will happen next. One important condition for mediation is confidentiality – the participants agree that they will not discuss what happens during the mediation with anyone not present. For this reason, it is important that everyone who has a role to play in its resolution is present at the mediation.

Mediation skills

In addition to neutrality and non-judgment, a good mediator will possess the following skills:

Ability to create rapport. In order to have any influence, the third person neutral must have authority and the trust of the parties. The best way to do this is to connect with both sides as an honest broker with the sole intent of understanding what is important to them and a desire to help them move on.

Good listening skills. People in dispute need to feel heard and taken seriously. Where each side is unable to do this to the other, the mediator plays an important role in validating each side's point of view. Deep listening involves hearing beyond the positions which someone is adopting and understanding the deeper needs and interests which lie behind those positions. It is possible to empathise with those deeper feelings without accepting that any position is right or wrong.

Ability to re-frame and summarise. When conveying messages from one side to the other the mediator must be able to express them in a way which best makes them able to be received.

Exploring options. Mediators need to have vision and the ability to stimulate discussion on different ways of seeing the conflict in which the parties have become stuck. The confidentiality of the process assists the parties to consider what might happen if they were to do something differently.

Ability to challenge. At the point at which options are being explored the mediator needs to be able to test the reality of what each is saying, without alienating them. This can be done by "playing devil's advocate" or asking the person to identify the weaknesses in their own arguments.

Closing a deal. People who have a disagreement often become so wedded to the dynamic of conflict that it is actually quite hard for them to let go of it. Imagining a future without having to fight for what they want may actually become an obstacle to concluding a mediation. A skilled mediator will be able to carry a settlement across the line by exploring what a "good enough" deal would enable the parties to go on to do, together or separately.

Putting Mediation skills into practice

It is almost certainly impossible to mediate in your own conflict because of the lack of impartiality in the outcome and the heightened emotions we feel when the stakes are high for ourselves. However, it is still possible to use some of the skills of a mediator listed above in order to diffuse a situation and make it less likely to escalate into a conflict even if we are one of the people in the disagreement. The key is to recognise what is happening, pause and see the bigger picture. In many situations the bigger picture will be the desire to maintain some sort of working relationship with the person with whom we are in dispute, beyond the rights and wrongs of the immediate situation. One of the options when seeking to agree a process for resolving the conflict is to mutually agree a neutral third person who possesses the skills of a mediator who might assist you to talk about the situation differently.

EXERCISE

Next time the opportunity arises, practice some of the techniques listed above and reflect on what happened. Did the other person react differently because you heard them out and expressed interest in exploring their point of view before stating your own? How did it feel to try not to react to provocation? Does seeing conflict as normal but remaining in or avoiding conflict altogether as unhealthy help to re-frame your relationship with conflict?