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Positive Confrontation

Michigan State University Extension Service

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POSITIVE CONFRONTATION



Michigan State University
Cooperative Extension Service
Home Economics Program

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Like it or not, nice people do get into conflict.

— Donna Sweeny, *Why We Don't Agree and What We're Going to Do About It.*

INTRODUCTION

This workbook was developed for individuals who want to expand their skills in living and working more positively with other people. It is meant to accompany the videocassette *Positive Confrontation*. For information on the videocassette, contact your local Cooperative Extension office.

Reading the workbook and completing the exercises will help you assess your effectiveness in handling problematic situations with others. You will also be better able to understand and deal with negative responses in others, including overly aggressive or passive behavior.

Confronting someone about something on which we disagree is never pleasant. However, unless we face and resolve conflicts, relationships usually deteriorate. Issues about which we disagree that arouse strong feelings in us and in others are usually issues of an interpersonal nature that involve some sort of perceived threat, demand or attack at a personal level. Early warning signs that conflict with another person or group is being poorly managed are increased sarcasm, teasing, nit-picking, unfair criticism, arguing, avoidance or stony silences.

The response patterns that we develop to deal with interpersonal difficulties are primarily based in the early messages we received about handling stressful situations. Such stored messages, which influence our present-day behavior, include how we viewed others' handling problems on a day-to-day basis, as well as what we were told about how to handle such problems. Also affecting our current responses are the communication strategies we have developed and our experience in conflict resolution — what worked and what failed when we expressed our feelings and thoughts. Taken together, these factors subsequently result in our present confidence or lack of confidence in standing up for our beliefs — and being able to do so without violating the basic rights of others.

Each section of this workbook has exercises to help you assess your individual approach in communicating with others and in managing interpersonal conflict. Case studies are presented to test your understanding of negative vs. positive confrontational approaches. Specific suggestions are given for responding effectively to others who are distressed, as well as for sharing your frustrations and concerns.

Finally, the ultimate goal of this resource is for you to more clearly understand the way you deal with problematic interpersonal issues and problems and to assess whether some changes in your strategy could ultimately improve that process. For those of you who want to do a more in-depth exploration of interpersonal communication and conflict management, a list of resources is provided at the end of this workbook.

CONFLICT AND CONFRONTATION

The Nature of Conflict

Stokeley Carmichael once quipped, "Conflict is as American as apple pie." Although life without conflict can be deadly boring, too much conflict can lead to family and work environments that are unhealthy, unproductive and unsatisfying.

Whenever we risk getting involved with others around us, we also risk becoming involved in minor or major conflicts. These may arise when our goals are different from those of others with whom we're interacting. At other times, we may share common goals with others but differ dramatically on how to achieve them. Other persons or groups may seem threatening — to our knowledge, perceptions, values, lifestyles, sense of "rightness," or "territory." There may not seem to be enough of something to go around — tangibles such as money and materials, or intangible resources such as time, talent, space or ideas. Communication may be ineffective or non-existent, intensifying the problem and leading to such feelings as hostility, resentment, apathy and defiance — in short, escalated conflict!



Conflict: The Good News and the Bad News

When conflict is channeled constructively, it can be growth producing in every realm of human affairs. Better ideas are produced, and people are forced to look at new approaches and clarify their views. In doing so, they have opportunities to test their capabilities.

Hardly anybody lives happily ever after. As Sleeping Beauty and Prince Charming rode off into the sunset, they were probably debating where to spend the night. He wanted to head back to the castle; she wanted a romantic interlude at the little inn on the edge of the forest. Issues, you see, are unavoidable, but trivial or serious, we manage to manage them. Only when issues escalate into problems do we feel backed against the wall with no way out, and this happens when:

An issue is never identified.

An issue is recognized but ignored until it festers into a problem.

An issue is handled but never effectively settled because a solution is arbitrarily imposed rather than mutually worked out.

— *Straight Talk*

Long-standing problems surface and can be dealt with. The tension that naturally accompanies conflict tends to stimulate interest and creativity for problem solving. In addition, positive conflict can:

- clear the air.
- let people express feelings/frustrations.
- make others' positions or ideas clear.
- lead to definition, clarification and resolution of issues.
- lead to alliances with others.
- help people understand what is important to others.
- bring a new sense of respect to all.
- generate new goals that are satisfactory to everyone.
- inject new "lifeblood" into relationships.

When conflict and confrontations are restricted because of ineffective communication or management strategies, they can be energy wasting and, ultimately, destructive. This happens when conflict is based on personality attacks, vindictiveness and/or personal power struggles. Poorly handled, conflict can defeat or demean people, creating a climate of distrust, suspicion and greater distance between them. It can destroy teamwork and create active or passive resistance, greater defending of turf, narrowing of interests, and withdrawal from common goal-seeking and achievement. In short, negative conflict has the potential to:

- cause bitterness, hostility, distrust, alienation.
- increase negative feelings to the point of destroying relationships.
- do long-lasting ego (self-image) damage.
- disrupt normal channels of cooperation.
- divert all parties' attention from other aspects of daily living.
- lead to physical violence and destructive actions.

Mountains or Molehills? How to Tell the Difference

Fortunately, most issues that surface on a day-to-day basis at home or at work are fairly ordinary and are handled without a great deal of thought or disruption. From time to time, however, tougher ones must be faced. In *Straight Talk*, the authors suggest that "... from time to time certain issues break our habitual stride because they can't be handled in a routine fashion. Generally, such issues arouse strong feelings in one or both partners, and a number of choices and differing points of view may have to be considered. Sometimes those choices are hazy and a solution is not readily apparent among the various options. Sometimes, the possibilities are overwhelming, or you and your partner have different expectations about the outcome. And sometimes, the issue itself is cloudy and relevant information is missing."

According to the same authors, an issue can be "anything that concerns one or more people and necessitates a decision that affects everyday life, personal growth, and/or the development of a relationship." These fall into three categories:

Topic issues, which include things, places, events, ideas and people (ex., housing, career, friends, money, children, leisure, clothes, time);

Personal issues, which concern you or your partner as individuals (ex., self-esteem, values, responsibility, goals, habits); and,

Relationship issues, which involve areas of joint importance to you and another person (ex., sex, trust, affection, commitment, decision making, communication, boundaries, closeness/distance, cooperation).

It is believed that relationship issues involve the most potential for conflict between people, because “intimacy and risk increase proportionately as one moves from the topic to the personal to the relationship level.” More often than not, when two people become intensely emotional about an issue, it is at the personal or relationship level, even though it may seem, on the surface, to be at a topic level.

Certain clues can warn us that an issue has the potential of becoming a problem. These can come through in the following forms:

1. Sense data.
Ex., *I hear* something different in your voice.
2. Interpretation.
Ex., *I think* her reluctance to participate here may be due to our not giving her any chance for input earlier.
3. Your feelings.
Ex., *I'm frustrated and angry* that this report wasn't taken care of!
4. Your intentions.
Ex., *I'd like to volunteer* for the position of program chair, but I'm not very good at speaking in front of a group.
5. Your actions.
Ex., *I keep saying* exercise is a good way to relieve tension, but I just don't get out and do it on a regular basis.

Though the hunches or “pinches” that enter our minds are sometimes unsettling, we need to pay attention to them. Checking out nagging feelings rather than ignoring them can be beneficial in keeping molehills from becoming insurmountable mountains later because we jump to conclusions, act impulsively, or behave in a way that others misunderstood. (Miller, Wackman, Nunnally and Saline, 1982).

When slightly disturbing thoughts and feelings involve others, we will want to weigh very carefully both the short-range and long-range consequences of raising a complaint by asking ourselves: Is it really worth the hassle? Am I expecting too much of the person, given the situation? Is the other person in any shape to do anything about it? Can that person do anything about it, even if he/she wants to? Is this the best time to bring it up, or would a cooling-off period be beneficial? Is this the best place for such a discussion? Do I have time to work it through? Is the relationship solid enough to stand

up under the complaint? Will the relationship be worth having if I *don't* raise the issue?

When the choice is to confront the other person over the issue, it will be important to observe the confrontation strategies outlined in the last section in the workbook on managing conflict. If the decision, however, is to drop the complaint and not move ahead with it, the "relationship slate" should be wiped clean of that particular complaint. In other words, it's not fair to harbor resentment against the other person or to save it and bring it up again in another time and place. This is like saving green stamps to cash in later, usually when the other person again commits a similar "transgression." When this approach is used, it is likely that such damaging phrases as "You always . . ." or "You never . . ." will precede the complaint and that the person who is under attack will counterattack or simply withdraw in anger.

Using Your Head: Differentiating Between Issues and Problems

To test your ability to correctly differentiate between an issue and a problem and to identify whether it exists at a topic, personal or relationship level, mark the following TI (Topic Issue), TP (Topic Problem), PI (Personal Issue), PP (Personal Problem), RI (Relationship Issue) or RP (Relationship Problem). Answers are given on the next page.

- _____ 1. You find yourself angry over your husband's sharing some personal family information with a golfing partner.
- _____ 2. You are thinking about going on a diet.
- _____ 3. You have been told by your boss that your typing skills need improvement.
- _____ 4. You and your daughter are at odds about how late she should be coming in after a date.
- _____ 5. You and your parents are discussing where to make a dinner reservation for a holiday.
- _____ 6. You are pondering over whether to get a puppy for your son.
- _____ 7. You and your wife disagree about paying the children for doing household chores.
- _____ 8. Thelma asks Jerry to explain why he's late again; he responds, "There's nothing to talk about here!"
- _____ 9. You and your husband are considering whether to attend a marriage encounter weekend.
- _____ 10. Your spouse announces that he/she has been offered an opportunity to take a job in another state.

-
- 11. Your 16-year-old son has admitted drinking alcohol at a party he attended last night.
 - 12. You remember that you must make a dentist appointment.
 - 13. Your partner fails to send a card on your birthday, though she knows this hurts your feelings.
 - 14. You are late to work because you failed to set your alarm again.
 - 15. You have delayed writing a letter to a friend and are worried she will be hurt.
 - 16. You leave your wife a note reminding her that she needs to deposit some money in the checking account.
 - 17. Your landlord has raised your rent for the second time in 12 months.
 - 18. You resent people smoking in the office bathroom but hesitate to say anything.
 - 19. Your paperboy continues to throw the paper in the bushes after you have discussed the problem with him.
 - 20. Your mother telephones you once a day at dinnertime.

Case Study: Carolyn and Jim

Carolyn and Jim have been married for 17 years and are facing one of the toughest issues in their marriage. The farm they've been operating, which has been in Jim's family for over 100 years, is no longer producing enough income to keep them financially afloat. For three years now, Carolyn has been driving 45 miles to a job as a school secretary in a neighboring town. She has grown proud of the fact that her paycheck is covering the family's necessities. At the same time, she has become resentful that what little is left over seems to "go down the drain" to support the farming operation. She has been trying to convince Jim that they should let the farm go and that the family would be better off if he got a non-farming job — any job.

Although Jim admits that the farm has not been able to turn a profit lately, he maintains that agriculture is simply in a "down cycle." He believes that holding on, rather than selling out, is the thing to do and refuses to discuss the issue, telling Carol that he is not a quitter.

Questions:

1. Why could this issue be identified as a topic issue?
2. What personal issues are involved here for Carolyn? For Jim?
3. What relationship issues can you identify?
4. What clues do we have that the issue is now, in fact, at the problem stage?

Answer to "Using Your Head"

- | | |
|--------|--------|
| 1. RP | 11. RI |
| 2. PI | 12. TI |
| 3. RI | 13. RP |
| 4. RP | 14. PP |
| 5. TI | 15. PP |
| 6. TI | 16. TI |
| 7. RP | 17. RP |
| 8. RP | 18. PP |
| 9. RI | 19. RP |
| 10. RI | 20. RI |

Fighting never solved a thing.
Turn the other cheek.
It isn't broken, don't fix it.
Always respect your elders.
Nice girls (boys) don't fight.
If you can't say anything nice,
don't say anything at all.



Sometimes the friction between [persons] in constant conflict cannot be explained only on the basis of differences in perspective It is necessary in such instances to look for a more permanent quality, namely, personality traits The romantic sees life through rose-colored glasses, the pessimist through dark-colored glasses. The autonomous person may view help as a put-down or a lack of confidence, while the dependent one sees it as a sign of caring. The autonomous person equates separateness with freedom. For the dependent person, however, separation amounts to abandonment. In the course of time, two personalities can gradually change. As one [person] becomes more tolerant of the other's traits, both often find, surprisingly, that their differences begin to blur. In fact, their personalities become shaped to accommodate one another, thus reducing the friction and misunderstanding.

— Aaron T. Beck

Reacting to Conflict

Early Messages and Later Response Patterns

Very early in life, we develop a predominant behavioral style in communicating with others and responding to conflict. We watch others in our daily lives responding to stressful events and observe the consequences of their words and actions on others: whether they get what they want; how much hassle is involved in achieving a personal goal that involves interpersonal conflict; the way they violate or respect others' rights in the process; and the extent to which they approach problems with honest and direct behavior or evasive, domineering or deprecatory behavior. These observations, along with the early verbal and non-verbal messages we receive ("fighting never solved a thing"; "don't make waves"; "you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar!") eventually result in fairly predictable behavior that, depending on the situation, is positive and effective, or negative and detrimental to preserving our relationships with others.

Response Patterns and Behavioral Styles

Donna Sweeny (*Express Yourself*) notes that people use four primary styles in daily interactions, and describes them as follows:

1. Passive Style

You may have times when you are just not interested in what is going on around you, and you don't care to take an active role. At other times, you may know that others are more knowledgeable or skilled in a particular area and so you choose a passive role. In these situations, a passive role is probably a healthy choice. The passive role becomes negative when you choose it habitually, regardless of your potential. Then it reinforces insecurities and negative self-concepts that hinder development. Use of risk-taking behavior is important to overcome negative uses of passive behaviors. Several types of passive people are seen: people who choose to be passive at particular times; people who have few opinions of their own; people who do not believe in their own opinions. Passive people tend to have:

- little self-approval.
- a need for direction and/or support from others.
- a submissive or compliant attitude.
- a need to please those they perceive as having power.
- an "agreeable" demeanor so they don't offend anyone.
- indifference to the immediate situation.

2. Aggressive Style

Though aggressive behavior sometimes has a selfish motivation, you may find yourself acting aggressively by the force with which you express your opinions or proceed toward certain goals. As long as you do not exclude other people or their interests, this is not a negative use of aggression. When a person behaves aggressively

without regard for possible value to be gained from others or respect for associates, aggressive behavior is then limiting and negative. Four types of aggressive people are seen: those who have strong opinions and back them up with their actions; people who knowingly dominate others and enjoy it; those whose selfish single-mindedness result in domination; those who overcompensate for their insecurities by domineering behaviors. Aggressive people:

- are goal-oriented.
- need or enjoy power and control.
- are poor listeners.
- are action-oriented.
- have a hard-driving nature.
- can be ruthless and manipulating.
- are closed to views other than their own.
- are insensitive to another's needs or feelings.
- are self-focused.



3. Martyr Style

Generally, the martyr style is a negative example of behavior. Martyrs tend to manipulate others, rather than straightforwardly ask for what they want. They often use pessimism or guilt to get others to do what they want. It is important to examine your

Remember that there is usually life beyond a particularly annoying or frustrating situation. Don't win the battle only to lose the war because of a tendency to overreact.

— Anonymous

The closer we come to truly understanding another person's primary motives and dominant values (not to mention our own), the better able we are to see consistency in behavior and the unity of personality. Expressions of consistency can change with time, even though the primary motives may remain the same. For example, the fearful child at age 1 screams a great deal; at age 5, he is less vocal but runs away from threatening situations; at age 15, he is quiet and somewhat of a loner; at age 25, he is shy, introverted and perhaps busy at some job where contact with people is minimal. Once we understand, for example, that the boy's primary motive is to avoid the threat he feels when he is too close to people, we can see that there is much unity in his behavior over time, even though its expression has been modified.

— Don Hamachek, *Encounters with the Self*

True assertiveness is a way of being in the world which confirms one's own individual worth and dignity while simultaneously confirming and maintaining the worth of others. People sometimes say that a given person has become "too assertive." By my definition, that is impossible. If assertive behavior is action that considers the rights of ourselves and others and is appropriate to the situation, there is no such thing as behavior that is too assertive.

— Robert Bolton, *People Skills*

behavior to see if you are using others in this negative fashion. There are times when you may "martyr" yourself knowingly, by risking your reputation, your public image or even your job for a cause you believe in or a controversial individual you feel you must support. You use such behavior knowing there is a risk and you are still willing to do it. The negative aspects of the martyr style do not pertain to these risks of choices beyond personal security. Clearly then, three types of martyrs may be observed: those who hold pessimistic and gloomy attitudes; those who martyr purposefully to produce guilt in others; and, those who knowingly espouse a risk-producing cause or situation.

Martyrs are generally:

- negative in life-view.
- pessimistic.
- closed to new ideas or to others' ideas.
- self-defensive.
- willing to engage in self-sacrifice.
- blameful.
- prone to use the past to predict the future in negative ways.
- guilt-producing
- highly manipulative.

4. Assertive Style

This is ideally the most well-rounded person. The assertive style is presented as a model of behavior. Self-analysis may show you times you can be quietly confident and assertive, and other times when you use one of the other three styles more than this one. This is to be expected and nothing to worry about! A goal may be to be more aware of the degree of worth of the other styles in particular situations. To learn to question your choice of behavior, ask, "Would greater use of the assertive style cause me to be more effective in this situation?" As awareness of choice of style and its worth increases, it becomes easier to make the choice that will lead you to the most effective use of style. Using assertive behavior may be risky at times, so it is helpful to be especially well prepared before entering a situation where you will attempt to be assertive. This helps overcome any insecurities you may feel. Assertive people have:

- a positive life view.
- self-confidence
- respect for others.
- an understanding and empathic nature.
- flexibility in dealing with others.
- strong commitment to whatever is undertaken.
- acceptance of responsibility.
- open-mindedness.

Assessing Your Personal Style

Though it is always difficult to be objective about yourself, it is worth the effort to try to do so. The following continuums, if marked as objectively as possible, can give some insight into your personal style. Please review the characteristics listed and mark an "x" where you find yourself in your typical daily interactions. (Place your mark anywhere along the line that is appropriate to your self-assessment.)

1. Passive Style



2. Aggressive Style



3. Martyr Style



4. Assertive Style



When you're finished with the style ratings, it can be very helpful to discuss your ratings with others with whom you live or work. Ask yourself such questions as:

- Am I content with my ordinary style?
- Is my usual style effective with others?
- Do others seem to see me as I see myself? Do they react to me as I expect?
- What might be some reasons that I use styles that may not be the most effective in my interactions with others?
- Would I like to become more assertive?
- What behaviors would I need to change or to learn to become more assertive?
- Do I dare risk trying new behaviors? In what situations could I try? Is it easier at particular times? If so, what are those situations? How can I extend those times?

Case Study: Marilyn and Bob

Marilyn and Bob both work full time. They have three children — Gary, age 10, Kim, age 8, and Amy, 6 months. Marilyn has grown increasingly resentful about the share of household responsibilities she is carrying as compared to those of Bob and the children. She alternates between brief complaints and silent pouting, waiting for Bob to make some changes in the situation. Bob responds to her complaints with comments such as, “If it’s so bad, figure out what you want everyone to do and tell us. Just quit whining about everything. I’m really sick of it!”



Questions:

1. What behavioral style is Marilyn using? How would you classify Bob's style?
2. What could be the effect of their behavior on the children's developing interpersonal communication and conflict management styles?
3. What steps must Marilyn take to begin acting more assertively in this situation?
4. What are the potentially positive effects of such a change in her behavior?
5. Could there be any negative effects?

Effects of Behavior Styles

Our behavioral style in handling conflict affects every area of our lives. The attitude and behavior we display toward others indicate either that we value our relationship with them and want to protect it, or that we place little value on it. The way we choose to confront others when we disagree with them sends a message that we are truly interested in learning more about their point of view and feelings about a particular issue; or, it creates a barrier, because they perceive us to be unwilling to listen, interested in pushing our

own point of view, or capable of being hurtful or unfairly critical. Our style also predicts whether others will try to take advantage of us or respect our ability to behave consistently, rationally, fairly and assertively. In a nutshell, our behavioral style in dealing with conflict sets up in others a positive and trusting view of us, or one that is negative and guarded (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Behavior Styles: Effects on Work/Family Interactions

Behavior Interactions	Aggressive	Martyr	Passive	Assertive
Attitude toward others	I'm OK You're not OK	I'm not OK You're not OK	You're OK I'm not OK	I'm OK You're OK
Attitude toward spouse	He/she must do as I say	He/she never does what I say	I must do what he/she wants	I consider his/her opinion – we do it together.
Contribution to partnership	A driving force; may dictate	A basic hindrance	Highly agreeable, but a follower	Mutual responsibility and action
Approach to children	Strict discipline	Inconsistent; sends guilt messages	Smothering or clinging love	Understanding; discipline fair but firm
Attitude toward work	Highly motivated to get results	Lets it be known how hard he/she works	Willing to help but seldom initiates	Deep involvement
Approach to problems	Ignores; tries to make them appear trivial	Passes the buck or blames other for problems	Talks about them; does little	Explores, weighs, reaches conclusions
Communication	Talks but does not listen	Talks today, deep silence tomorrow; manipulates through guilt	Chatters and agrees; wants others' approval	Listens questions; then speaks tactfully but honestly

MANAGING CONFLICT

Dealing with Others in Distress

The way in which we initially approach a conflict situation with another person will be vitally important in our being able to work with that person to structure a mutually satisfying solution to the problem. Whenever we move into confrontation with the goal of winning or convincing the other person about how wrong he/she is, we are employing strategies that could ultimately damage the relationship. For a fair and growth-producing confrontation, the persons involved need to approach the situation honestly wanting to learn more about the *others'* point of view and feelings. Realistically, of course, that is not always the case. Because we can't control anyone else's feelings, thoughts or behavior and can be sure only about our own motives, we need to think carefully about our feelings and behavior in any given conflict situation. We will want to guard against distorting events or the temptation to play games with others to fulfill our needs at their expense.

When another person approaches us with criticism, we need to observe certain *DOs* and *DON'Ts*:

DO treat the person with respect.

DO think about how the person feels.

DO be quiet to show you are listening.

DO keep direct eye contact with the person.

DO get all information you need for understanding.

DO ask questions in a firm, calm, non-hostile or non-defensive manner.

DO agree with what you think is true and be able to admit your mistakes.

DO let the person know if you have understood his/her objections.

DO let the other person have his/her say before you attempt to respond.

DO express appreciation for the person's having come to you openly.

DON'T find fault with the criticizer. Let him/her say what he/she will.

DON'T interrupt.

DON'T act like a martyr and create the impression that the other person is destroying your spirit.

DON'T turn around the person's reaction to you by calling him/her oversensitive.

DON'T play off the problem in a joking way.

DON'T change the subject.

DON'T imply ulterior motives to the person.

DON'T become defensive, deny allegations or attack.

The bottom line here is to remember that each person has a right to his/her opinion and the right to accept or reject another's opinion. The aim is to react in a non-aggressive, calm manner.

If the other person becomes verbally or physically aggressive so that physical or emotional safety seems to be an issue, we need to calmly and firmly cut off the interaction, saying something such as, "This issue is important to both of us, and we need to talk about it. Right now seems not to be the best time for either one of us — we need a cooling-off period." Remember that it is the responsibility of the person breaking off the interaction to contact the other person to continue talking about the issue. This should be done as soon as possible.

Listening

One of the most significant factors in the breakdown of communication is poor listening skills. Our listening responses depend on our respect for the other person, our interest in what is being communicated verbally and non-verbally, and our freedom from external and internal preoccupation. Also affecting our ability to listen actively is our failure to get past the first part of the sender's message because we "already know" what is going to be said, we've heard it "a thousand times before," or because we tune out after negatively evaluating the speaker or the speaker's remarks.

Attending skills are those involved in paying close attention to the other person. They include turning toward the speaker, using appropriate body language, establishing and maintaining eye contact, and maintaining a non-distracting environment. When a husband grunts in response to what his wife is saying and remains deeply involved in reading the newspaper, chances are good he is not really listening to his spouse — and she knows it! When a father is telling his teen-age son about being careful with the sliding door he just repaired, but the son is distracted by a TV show in the background, we can be sure the son isn't tuned in to the father's message.

Sometimes, another person appears to want to share something with us or seems troubled but says nothing. In such cases, we can use "door openers" or "minimal encouragers." For example, you might suspect a co-worker is troubled about something. You could say: "You don't seem like yourself today. Want to talk about it?" A parent suspecting a child has had some trouble at school might ask, "How are things going at school lately?" When the other person begins to share a problem but then seems reluctant to go on, we cause encouraging verbal responses such as, "Oh?" or "I see; go on."

Silence is a skill worth developing. The use of silence in a conversation is remarkably effective in getting at another person's meaning. Too often, listeners feel embarrassed about short pauses and try to fill the gap too readily.

The art of good listening also involves the ability to respond reflectively. Another word for reflecting is paraphrasing. When we listen carefully enough so that we can tell the speaker what he/she just said in our own words, we are paraphrasing. For example, a husband comes in from working on his car and says, "I just can't

Improving Your Listening Skills

Don't fake understanding.

Vary your responses.

Don't tell the speaker, "I know how you feel."

Focus on the speaker's feelings as well as his/her words.

Choose the most accurate feeling word when reflecting what the other person might be feeling.

Develop vocal empathy.

Strive for concreteness.

Listen reflectively, i.e., paraphrasing the speaker's word, reflecting feelings, behaviors that seem to be obvious:

- before you act or say anything.
- before you argue or criticize.
- when the other person is experience strong feelings or wants to talk over a problem.
- when the other person seems to be sorting out his/her feelings and thoughts.

— Gerard Egan, *Encounter: Group Processes for Interpersonal Growth*

understand it. I thought I knew what the problem was." His wife says, "That's really discouraging." She refrains from giving her opinion or making a judgmental comment about what he said. He feels that she has heard him and understands his feelings. He is encouraged to say more: "Right. I put a lot of time into that car and now there's more money we'll have to shell out!" Her response is again reflective: "You're worried about the money that we'll have to spend getting it fixed."

This is a skill that takes some practice. It is not easy to do because it takes concentration and a good deal of effort to keep from giving our own opinions about what the speaker is saying. It is important to remember that though it may feel awkward and phony when you first begin to use the method, this feeling fades as you practice and get better at it. A pitfall in using reflective listening is that it is not always appropriate. We need to make wise choices about when it would be helpful and when it isn't necessary. When we "sprinkle" reflective listening around indiscriminately, people can begin to feel they are being "techniqued" rather than listened to.



Variations in listening styles are apparent to both the trained and the untrained ear. Easily spotted is the **hostile listener** who is more interested in sparring than in listening. This person interrupts frequently with defensive and sarcastic remarks or with statements that are likely to surprise, anger, irritate or confuse the other person. The hostile listener may say, "I'm listening," but the body language, tone of voice, facial expression and eye contact gets his/her true message across: "I want YOU to stop talking and listen to ME!"

The **disinterested listener** also gives off some fairly powerful non-verbal messages that tell the listener, "I'm not interested; I'm bored with what you're saying." This person is usually thinking about something else, and it shows! He/she may keep eye contact

on the television set or reading matter rather than on the person who is talking, all the time assuring the person that he/she is listening. The disinterested listener may eat, drink, smoke, play with objects, look elsewhere, move body parts rhythmically or yawn. This kind of behavior has the potential of evoking intense anger or frustration in the person who is trying to communicate.

A close counterpart is the **distracting listener**, who tends to throw people off track with meandering statements only minimally related to what is being said. Non-verbal behavior might include picking lint off the speaker's clothing, rummaging through something, jiggling change, or any number of other activities designed to draw the speaker's attention away.

The **active listener** communicates non-verbally his/her willingness to listen. Active listeners square up their bodies with the speaker's. They maintain direct eye contact and nod their heads when appropriate. When appropriate, they may smile to "lighten up" any tension involved in the interaction. They refrain from making distracting movements or statements and from interrupting. They make verbal responses only to clarify or encourage the other person to continue until both parties are reasonably satisfied that what needed to be said has been said — and listened to. Because active listeners have a goal of understanding the other person's point of view, they will be aware of possible discomfort or anger in the person confronting them and try to set the person at ease. They will clarify any areas where there might possibly be a misunderstanding, using phrases such as, "Do you mean to say . . . ?" or, "So, what I hear you saying is . . . ; is that correct?" When they respond verbally, their tone of voice will indicate that they are simply interested in getting more information, not in being defensive. They will listen to the challenge being given them and then be truly thoughtful about whether a change in their behavior is merited. Because this cannot always happen right on the spot but may require additional time to think, the active listener may move to close the present discussion with comments such as "I really appreciate your sharing your feelings and concerns about this with me because I value our relationship. I'd like to think more about what you've said and then talk with you soon about it." Again, it is the responsibility of the person breaking off the confrontation to quickly schedule a time to bring it to closure.

Understanding Communication Transactions

One of the ways we can improve our understanding of other people and of ourselves is to become familiar with how differences in personality operate in communication transactions between people. This concept grew out of Eric Berne's (1961) ideas about personality and interpersonal communication. He called his approach "Transactional Analysis," or T.A. An important aspect of this approach was studying individuals' thoughts, feelings and behavior based on the way they send and receive messages.

Berne believed that all of us have three major psychological states within us that can be directly observed in our verbal responses and behavior. He called them the *Parent*, the *Adult* and the *Child*. These states are consistent patterns of related thought, feelings and actions. Some psychologists have expanded these three ego stages

into five: Critical Parent, Nurturing Parent, Adult, Free Child and Adapted Child. Robert Fetsch, Extension specialist with the University of Kentucky, describes these states as follows:

Critical Parent

The Critical Parent (CP) ego state is one of the five ego states available to you. For example, you might tell someone, "Leave me alone!" You are probably thinking something like, "I want to be by myself right now," or "I don't like him (or her)." At the same time, you might feel angry and act in such a way that indicates that you want to be left alone. Your voice may be assertive, condescending or stern, and you might accompany what you are saying by frowning or pounding on the table. When you think, feel and act in such a manner, you are using your Critical Parent. This ego state is the part of yourself that you inherited from authority figures when you were too little to think about protecting yourself from dangerous situations. So you copied the actions of your parents or caretakers. This explains why today you look and sound just like they did when you were little. Take note of whom you sound like when you talk to someone else in a tense situation. Chances are that you look and sound very similar to the way your parents or caretakers looked and sounded when they used their Critical Parent with you.

Besides using Critical Parent with others, you can use it against yourself. You might criticize yourself by thinking, "I should be friendlier, more patient with other people, thinner . . ." There are a both negative and a positive Critical Parent. Negative Critical Parent is bossy, cynical, fault-finding and demanding. Positive Critical Parent is assertive, persistent, outspoken and determined.

Nurturing Parent

Another ego state is the Nurturing Parent (NP). Just as it sounds, this is the part of your personality that takes care of yourself and others like good, caring parent cares for a small baby. When you listen attentively as a fellow employee tells you about his or her job dissatisfaction, you are using your Nurturing Parent. Whenever you are empathic, encouraging or supportive to someone else, your Nurturing Parent is high.

You can express your nurturance either positively or negatively. People who rescue others when they do not need rescuing and who keep others dependent on them are using their Nurturing Parent in a negative manner. "Rescuers" are often complaining, soft-hearted or prudish. On the other hand, people who use their Nurturing Parent in a positive manner might be described as kind, considerate, patient, praising and understanding.

Adult

The Adult (A) is the computer part of yourself. "What time is it?" "2:30 p.m." Anytime you ask for and give straight facts — i.e., how, when, what, who — you use your Adult. This ego state is matter-of-fact and logical. It lacks feelings. When our Adult ego state is high, we are calm, rational and clear-thinking. Our voices will reflect this.

Free Child

When you are in your Free Child (FC) ego state, you sound childlike, soft, loud, spontaneous or uncensored. You might use words such as “Wow!” “I won’t.” “I want” “phoey” “nuts!” This is the part of you that wants what you want when you want it! When you are in your Free Child ego state, you are more spontaneous, imaginative, uninhibited, natural, sexy, curious or spunky. You giggle or have a good belly laugh more easily.

Adapted Child

All of us have learned to adapt to the needs of society. This is why you practice such rituals as saying “please” and “thank you,” and ask question such as “Did I do OK?” This is why you agree to drive your car on the right side of the street in America and the left side in Britain. As a society, we get along better by agreeing to adapt to certain rules and regulations.

Adapted Child has both positive and negative aspects. People who are described as civilized, mannerly, cooperative, self-controlled or pleasant have developed positive aspects of their Adapted Child. Those who are described as overly compliant, moody, withdrawn, manipulative, defensive, stubborn or rebellious have developed negative aspects. If you are accustomed to getting your way with others by pouting, by being defiant or by having temper tantrums, you are using negative aspects of your Adapted Child.

Communication transactions that we have with others are affected by the ego state we and the other person are experiencing during any particular transaction. The result is that we can be on the same track with the other person (complementary transaction), or completely off the track (crossed or uncomplimentary transaction). Don Hamachek, author of *Encounter with Others*, explains the concept as follows:

Complementary Transactions (we’re on the same track). A complementary or parallel transaction occurs when the message you send from a specific ego state elicits a more or less predictable response from a specific ego state in another person. It’s the kind of communication between people that is direct, clear and mutually reinforcing. A complementary transaction can occur between any two ego states. For example, two people can communicate parent to parent when expressing concern for someone, or adult to adult when exchanging information, or child to child or parent to child when living it up a little. We can communicate from any of our three ego states to any one of the three of the other person.

Non-verbal cues — facial expressions, body language, gestures, tone of voice and so forth — all contribute to the final meaning of any transaction. When there is agreement or congruency between what is said and how it is said, and when the responses are pretty much what is expected and appropriate, then we can say that the communication transaction is complementary. This does not always happen, however. Sometimes, our message receives an unexpected or inappropriate response, and the lines of communication become what are called

1. Husband: It really burns me to work hard all day and come home to an empty house and no hot meal because you're chasing around with that project you're on!

2. Your response: _____

1. Your accountant: We may have a problem with some of the accounts. I'd like to meet with you about it.

2. Your response: _____

1. Person with whom you are taking a class: This instructor expects way too much of everyone. I'm over my head!

2. Your response: _____



Case Study: Carolyn and Jim . . . Continued

Remember Carolyn and Jim, who were experiencing conflict about selling or not selling the farm? In one communication transaction, they had been discussing the fact that her paycheck was covering family expenses and that the farming operation was contributing nothing in this area. Carolyn raised the point that anything left over after she had covered their usual bills was being used to support farming expenses and that she was growing resentful of never having any money to do what *she* wanted to do.

At one point, she wistfully noted, “You know what I’d like?”

“No,” answered her husband. “What would you like?”

“I’d like a new couch,” she responded.

With a derisive laugh, her husband said in a sarcastic way, “We’re facing bankruptcy, and you want a couch! My folks were married for 40 years, and my mother never had a new couch!”

Carolyn shot back. “I am *not* your mother!”

Questions:

1. When Carolyn said she wanted a new couch, identify her probable ego state (parent, adult, child) and the ego state in her husband she was appealing to (parent, adult, or child?). Was this transaction complementary?
2. When Jim responded, identify his ego state and the one he was appealing to in his wife. Was this transaction complementary?
3. What kinds of feelings do you think were operating in Carolyn as she answered, “I am *not* your mother!”

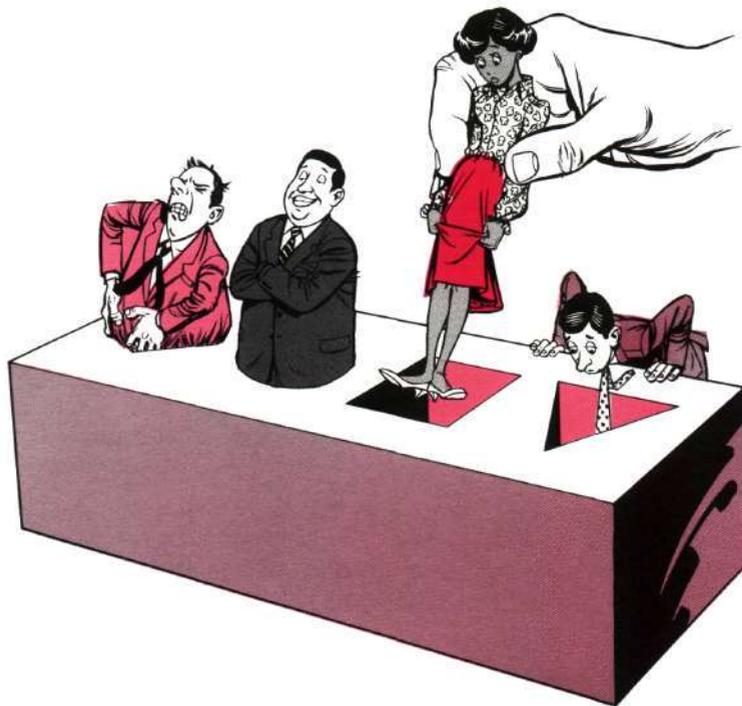
Delivering an Effective I-Statement

Frequently, when people are upset, they resort to “you-statements” to communicate their dissatisfaction to another person: “You are so inconsiderate!” or “You make me so unhappy,” or “You never care about what I want!” You-statements set up walls between people. When used in tense interpersonal situations, they heighten defensiveness in the other person and ultimately contribute to communication breakdown. In addition, you-statements assign considerable power to the other person. (If the other person has the power to make you unhappy, it must be that your happiness is in the hands of this person!)

Breaking the you-statement habit calls for speaking more directly and taking responsibility for your own thoughts and feelings (*I think . . . I feel . . . I worry that . . .*). Don Hamachek (1982) suggests that I-statements can improve your interpersonal communication in the following ways:

- They heighten a sense of interpersonal trust and closeness insofar as you are able to reveal more of yourself to others.

- You talk to people rather than for them or at them.
- You stay in touch with your inner feelings.
- You avoid labeling, judging and evaluating the other person's behavior.



In formulating the I-statement, you will need to include the following parts:

1. Begin with "I," telling the other person what you are thinking or feeling (ex., I felt discounted . . .).
2. Follow by telling the other person the exact behavior that is upsetting you, making you angry, etc. (ex., I feel discounted when you read the paper while I'm talking . . .).
3. Follow this by letting the person know exactly how the behavior affects you (ex., I felt discounted when you read the paper when I'm talking because it seems as if what I have to say is not important . . .).
4. End with what you would like to have the person do in the future, what change you would like to see made (ex., I feel discounted when you read the paper when I'm talking because it seems as if what I have to say is not important. I'd like you to put the paper down and pay attention to me while I'm talking).

Being able to construct an effective I-statement on the spot when involved in an emotionally tense situation calls for practicing it at non-stressful times. Read the following brief situations. Orally construct exactly what you might say to the other person to confront him/her about behavior that is upsetting or angering you. Remember the form of the I-statement: briefly state how you feel or what you think; identify the exact behavior that is bothering you; state the effect the behavior has on you; and state what you want as alternative behavior.

-
1. Your husband has consulted his parents about a loan before discussing it with you. You are feeling highly resentful.
 2. Your 12-year-old son has failed to put his bike in the garage, something you have talked to him about in the past.
 3. Your husband is only half listening to what you're saying and keeps looking at the TV while you're explaining something to him that is important to you.
 4. You're car-pooling with a neighbor who is continually late, making you late also. She pulls up 15 minutes late again.
 5. You are having a large family party. Your 17-year-old daughter is sitting in the kitchen talking to her cousin while you and the cousin's mother clean up the dishes. It irritates you that neither of them is helping, especially because you cooked the entire dinner.
 6. You are working on a committee with seven other people. One man constantly interrupts you and others, not allowing you to finish.
 7. Your husband brings home a business associate for dinner without letting you know. The house is a mess, and you have leftovers planned for dinner.
 8. Your mother-in-law hears your daughter say, "Mom, you're weird!" She says to you, "I think it's terrible that you and Tom let the kids talk to you that way." You are tired of her criticism of the children and of you and your husband.
 9. You pull up to the McDonald's window and order a burger and orange juice. The person taking the order says, "Would you like some fries to go with the burger?" You are tired of their hype and want to let them know.
 10. Your hairdresser keeps pressing you to "get rid of that gray." You enjoy the color of your hair and want her to quit pressing you on the subject.

Golden Rules for Sharing Your Point of View

When we're involved in tense situations with another person, we are not always at our rational best. The stress that is involved causes us to shift into a more emotional frame of mind. Simply knowing this may help us monitor ourselves more closely in such situations. It helps to keep the following "golden rules" of behavior firmly in mind when in a confrontation with another person:

- Recognize and admit to a growing problem while it is still small and, if it is important in the quality of the relationship, be willing to discuss it. Don't store up complaints — either bring them up in a non-threatening way when they occur or drop them.
 - Pick issues thoughtfully and carefully. Take time to clarify your thoughts and feelings before you react. On emotionally charged issues, rehearse, if possible, before making a complaint.
 - When stating your view, needs and feelings, watch your tone of voice. Avoid such overtones as sarcasm, hostility, disgust, or suspicion.
 - Be brief.
 - Focus on the issue, not on personalities or on the past.
-

- Use I-statements, not you-statements.
- Disclose your feelings, but don't attack.
- Avoid loaded words and phrases (You always . . . You never . . . You should . . . If I were you . . .).
- Put objections in question form as often as possible (What would you think if Have you considered the possibility Would it work if). Always offer an alternative or different way of thinking about the problem if you raise an objection.
- Minimize the negative and maximize the positive.
- Acknowledge and reinforce any sign of cooperation in the other person.
- Help the person save face whenever possible by offering choices and compromising when it does not violate your own rights.
- Use the problem to discover the other person's thinking rather than as an occasion to WIN.
- Retain flexibility—settle for gaining a little rather than achieving a total victory over the other person.

Keeping the Fat Out of the Fire: Helpful Phrases for Handling Conflict

Following are phrases that might be helpful when you're responding to someone with whom you disagree. After actively listening to the other person's point of view and trying to understand it, express yourself as follows:

- I'm glad to know how you feel about this. Let me tell you my view
- I appreciate your sharing your ideas about the problem. I see it a bit differently
- That's an interesting way to look at it. Did you ever think about it this way?
- Your idea may well be the way to go (possible pause), but I've thought of a couple of alternatives I'd like us to consider

When you feel the other person's approach would be unreasonable or inappropriate:

- Oh, interesting. I'd never thought of it that way. Tell me, with your view in mind, how would you handle (Perhaps follow the person's example with, "What might be some positive or negative outcomes attached to that approach?")

When someone has a strongly differing opinion:

- Well, you've expressed your feelings very clearly. However, I don't quite see it that way, and I'd like to tell you why or . . . however, here's the way I see it.

When an aggressive person is dominating a meeting and you're in charge, interrupt firmly and say:

- Thank you for sharing your views, Don. Helen, please tell us your views on this (and be certain to call on a person you know is able to immediately express a more rational view).

When someone is shouting at you, is out of control or absolutely refuses to listen to any other point of view:

- I'd like to talk with you further about this, but now doesn't seem to be the best time for either one of us. Let's take a little time off to deal with our feelings and the problem and then get back together. I'll call you.

Collaborative Problem Solving: The Final Step in Conflict Resolution

Just because we've been able to get to the talking stage with someone about a problem we're mutually experiencing does not mean that the problem has been solved. To get to a solution, individuals will need to move through the following six steps of collaborative problem solving:

1. Define the problem in terms of needs, not solutions.
2. Brainstorm possible solutions.
3. Select the solutions(s) that will best meet both parties' needs and check possible consequences.
4. Plan who will do what, where and by when.
5. Implement the plan.
6. Evaluate the problem-solving process and at a later date, the solution.

Getting through this process will, of course, draw on all of the listening skills, assertion skills and conflict management skills that have been detailed earlier. For an in-depth discussion, see Bolton, *People Skills*.

CONCLUSION

If we allow it, conflict with others can be negative, leading to fractured relationships and detrimental interpersonal problems; or, it can be growth producing and strengthen alliances between individuals and groups. Human nature being what it is, people respond to others who are friendly, open and supportive in a much different way than to others who are demeaning, pushy and hurtful.

Sometimes, we find that conflict management strategies and behaviors we learned earlier are not serving us well in the present. The good news is that we can acquire more effective skills. This calls for honestly assessing our style of interacting with others during confrontation and replacing approaches that cause our interpersonal problem-solving efforts to go haywire. Developing effective conflict management skills takes a commitment to watchdogging our behavior in emotionally laden situations and practicing assertive behavior so that we protect our interests without violating the rights of others.



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