How to Turn Conflict into Collaboration

Have you ever found yourself in the middle of a conflict, wondering how you got there? Maybe it seemed like a moment ago everything was OK, but in a few sentences the conversation got totally out of hand. Conflict can erupt quickly, or tension can build during a conversation or meeting until the moment comes when the discussion has turned into a contest instead of a collaboration.

When that happens, here’s what to do.

- **Notice your bodily state of being.** When we feel tension or anger it’s always located somewhere in the body: a tensing of the face, a feeling in the stomach, a headache, a higher heart and breathing rate. There’s a surge of adrenaline, going back to the days when that sabre-tooth cat was out to get you, preparing you to fight or flee. We still feel that rush of adrenaline when our primitive brains react to tension. The more quickly you can notice that change in your body, the sooner you can act to turn the conflict into collaboration.

- **Pause before responding.** In conflict things always speed up, so slow things down. Remember to breathe. Let your mind catch up to your body.

- **Listen to what the other person is saying.** When we feel conflict we usually either avoid it entirely or really get into it. In both cases genuine dialog and collaboration is impossible. We all know when we’re not being heard by someone else. Even if that person is quiet while we talk we pick up on all the non-verbal cues. Usually in conflict all parties are much more anxious to get their point across than they are to listen to another’s point of view. What makes listening so difficult is that we think that if we listen then we’ll never get a chance to make our own viewpoint known. Actually, the reverse is true.

- **Pause before responding.** (Do you sense a theme here?) Collect your thoughts, and consciously put your own position on the back burner for a few minutes.

- **Reflect back what you are hearing.** This is the hardest part! It’s like using the strength of an opponent in martial arts. When we feel attacked the last thing that naturally comes to mind is to (sincerely) say something like, “Now let me see if I’m hearing your concerns correctly; I want to make sure I’m really getting it.” Active listening requires the use of the more developed parts of the brain. It takes practice and concentration, a process unfamiliar to the primitive brain.

- **Wait until the emotional tone lowers before you make your own point.** As you actively listen to the other person the first thing you will notice is a look of surprise on her or his face! Your so-called opponent has probably geared up for battle, and active listening will put him or her off balance. As you help the other to identify her or his concerns in more depth you will also notice a lowering of the tension level. Your own adrenaline rush has subsided. The same will be true of the other person. You will also assist him or her to get at the real underlying concerns which might be quite different from the original topic.

- **Finally, when the time and tone are right, put forth your own point of view.** This is what we are afraid won’t happen, but if you have listened well you are in a better position to be heard yourself. Try saying something like this: “Now that I think I really understand your concerns, I’d like to share my perspective on this topic.”

None of this will happen quickly or easily. This behavior is a skill that takes practice. Try role playing your responses with a friend sometime and see how you do! Then turn your next potential conflict into collaboration.

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