Conflict Management

Campus-wide Leadership Series

January 9, 2009

Larry Long, Jr., Ph.D., Senior Director
Counseling & Educational Support Services
The University of Kansas Medical Center
llong@kumc.edu • 913-588-6587
Assertive Behavior

Assertive Behavior includes standing up for your rights without infringing on the rights of others. Assertive behavior results in an "I win; you win" outcome. Assertion involves expressing beliefs, feelings and preferences in a way which is direct, honest, and appropriate and shows a high degree of respect for you and for others.

"When you talk, I can't hear the movie. Please keep it down."
"I really like it when you wear that shirt. You look great!"

Passive / Nonassertive Behavior is when someone gives up their own rights and (directly or indirectly) defers to the rights of another person. Passive behavior results in an "I lose; you win" outcome. Passive behavior includes violating your own rights through inaction or by failing to express your thoughts, feelings or desires.

"We can do whatever you want. Your ideas are probably better."

Aggressive Behavior is when someone stands up for their own rights without regard for others. Aggressive behavior results in an "I win; you lose" outcome. Aggression is self-expression that demands, attacks or humiliates other people, generally in a way which shows lack of respect for others.

"Hey, I'm in a hurry. Get out of my way."

Passive-Aggressive Behavior occurs when someone acts out aggressive impulses in an indirect way. When people act passive-aggressively, they attempt to get what they need or want indirectly or manipulatively. Passive-aggressive behavior is an indirect attempt to control or punish others.

"I'm sorry I'm so late. I didn't realize this was such a big deal."
"Oh, don't bother, I'll just have to do it myself."

Assertive Behavior is: Self-Expressive; Honest; Respectful of the Rights of Others
Direct and Firm; Socially Responsible; Learned, not Inborn
Equalizing - benefiting self, other and relationship
Verbal - includes feelings, thoughts, desires, rights, facts, opinions
Nonverbal - eye contact, voice, posture, facial, gestures, timing
Appropriate - for the person, culture and situation

Assertiveness Script: "When you __(behavior)__ , I feel / think ______________; So, I would like __(new behavior)__ ."
Types of Assertion

Basic Assertion
Simple expression of standing up for personal rights, beliefs, feelings or opinions.
Example: When being interrupted, "Excuse me, I'd like to finish what I'm saying."

Empathic Assertion
Recognition of other person's situation or feelings followed by another statement standing up for speaker's rights.
Example: "I know you are feeling angry and frustrated while you wait for a response. But, the best I can do is give you a ballpark estimate of how long it will take."

Escalating Assertion
Start with a "minimal" assertive response... Other fails to respond... Gradually escalate the assertion?--increasingly firm without being aggressive.
Example: From the first example, "I know what you have to say is important but I really want to finish what I was saying." "I really want to finish before you begin to speak."

Confrontive Assertion
Describe what was to be done... Describe what actually occurred... Express what you want.
Example: "I told you to complete the forms by November 15, and you agreed to do so. Now it is January 15 and you are telling me that you forgot the forms but you still expect to complete our business on time. What is it that you want me to do?"

I-Language Assertion
Description of behavior: "When you __________ ,"
How it affects you life: "It affects __________ ,"
Describe your feelings: "and I feel __________ ;"
Describe your desire: "Therefore, I would like __________ ."
Example: "When you shout the effect is I am unable to work with you and I feel angry. Therefore, I would like for you to stop shouting and tell me what you want."

Positive Assertion
Expressing positive feelings about yourself or someone else.
Examples: "I'm glad you came back to see me." "I did a good job working with that upset student."

Repeated Assertion
Sometimes called "Broken Record." Opposite of escalation. Simple, calm, repetition--saying what you want over and over again, rote repetition.
Example: "You said you would complete this form and there is missing information."...A sarcastic reply... "The form has not been completed."...Another comment... "I have to have this form completed."

Fogging Assertion
Acknowledging possibility of truth to what other person is saying--agreeing in concept but not necessarily in fact.
Example: "I know these rules may appear to make no sense, but they are the procedures I must use."
Effective Communicating & Fair-Fighting Guidelines

1. **Own Your Response.** Use "I-language" instead of falling back on the "make-feel" myth. For example, say, "I feel worried and scared when you drink so much beer" instead of, "your drinking is making me crazy."

2. **Be Specific.** Avoid using extreme or global language like "always," "never," "everyone." Instead, use more modifying or tentative statements, "sometimes," "often," or "maybe." Avoid character assassination. Talk about incidents rather than personality traits.

3. **One At A Time.** Solve one problem at a time, stick to the present situation and stay focused.

4. **Listen As Much As You Talk.** Make reflective or clarifying statements in order to show that you understand the other's position. Seek information as much as you give your opinion.

5. **Avoid Intention Reading (AKA- Mind Reading).** Get "reality checks" instead of acting on assumptions of the other person's intentions or motives. "I think you're afraid of letting me have space because you're afraid of losing me. Is that right?" Instead of "You just want me to live a miserable life, held hostage in this disaster you call a relationship."

6. **Avoid Arguing Reactively.** Stay calm, keep control of your behavior and as much as possible speak in a neutral tone of voice. Give yourself the luxury of a "time-out" to rethink your position and make effective decisions.

7. **Admit Your Part Of The Problem.** Ongoing conflicts are like dances, "It takes two to tango." Focus on identifying your own dance steps that keep a conflict going then learn a new step.

8. **Ask Yourself, "Whose Problems Is This?"** Avoid taking too much responsibility for another's behavior. In most cases, allow others to experience the consequences of their behavior and thinking instead of needlessly protecting them.
9. **Argue Sober.** Avoid discussing important issues with any individual who is under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

10. **Sleep On It.** Sometimes it is okay to "let the sun go down on your anger." Agree to discuss "hot" topics at a time when each person is rested and alert. A good night's rest can facilitate a refreshed perspective. However, it's important not to collude with your partner to avoid the problem the next day.

11. **Agree To Disagree.** Know that many arguments are about opinions, not facts, or at least opinions about facts. Be tolerant of different opinions and perspectives.

12. **Avoid Power Struggles.** Power struggles are about me trying to get you to do, be, or think like me so that I'll get what I want or will feel more comfortable. Focus on resolving the power struggle instead of getting caught up in big arguments over "little things."

13. **Declare A Cease Fire.** If you at an impasse, then it's time to declare a cease fire. Carefully learn the other person's perspective and wishes. Thoughtfully examine and express your own. Then consider compromise, creative alternatives, going along or sticking to your guns. Take your time.

14. **Focus On What's Right.** Acknowledge the accuracy of the other person's statements instead of focusing on how they are "wrong."

15. **Clarify Your Wants.** Realize that most of what are called "needs" are really "wants". You need to breath air, drink water, etc. Ask for what you want without making demands.

16. **It Takes Time.** Realize that effective problem solving takes time, effort and practice. Tolerate disappointing results and use feedback to help improve your skills.

17. **Ask For Help.** Be willing to get help from a neutral, third person if you are in a stuck or deteriorating relationship. Friends, family members, ministers or counselors can often provide assistance to help you get things back on track.
LADDER To A Successful Confrontation

- **L**ook at your rights, what you want, what you need, and what your feelings are about the situation.
- **L**et go of blame, the desire to hurt, and self-pity.

- **A**rrange for a time and place to discuss your problem that is convenient for you and for the other person (exclude this step during spontaneous situations)

- **D**efine the problem situation as specifically as possible.
- **D**eclare the facts as you see them – share your opinion and beliefs

- **D**escribe your feelings so that the other person has a better understanding of how important the issues are to you.
- **D**escribe the feelings so that the other person knows the importance of the issues.

- **E**xpress your request in one or two easy-to-understand sentences.
- **E**xpress your request in one or two easy-to-understand sentences.
- **E**xpress your request in one or two easy-to-understand sentences.

- **R**einforce the other person to give you what you want (the best reinforcer is often a positive consequence)
Most organizations publish mission, vision, and value statements that are well written and bring a tear to the eye. But all too often there is a disconnect between employees’ actual conduct and the official organizational philosophy. This condition breeds cynicism among those employees whose behavior is consistent with organizational values.

Buddha said, “To know and not to do is not to know.” Most employees say they value teamwork, for example, but do they know what they should do to maintain a positive, service-driven work environment? Do they all have the same understanding of what it means to communicate effectively, solve problems, and manage conflicts? Before we can hold each other accountable for professional communication and effective teamwork, we must establish clear and concise standards.

The first step in establishing standards is to ask ourselves:

What are the characteristics of the best team player with whom we have ever worked? What are the characteristics of the coworker from hell?

Issues to consider when describing these characteristics include:

- Attitude, work habits, and service ethic
- Relationship with members of different shifts, work units, and job classifications
- Communication with manager(s)
- Conflict management and problem-solving
- Commitment to continuous learning and technical competence
- Welcoming of new employees

By identifying the best and worst communication and teamwork practices, we are able to recognize professional communication when we see it, and hold each other accountable for constructive conduct.

Editor’s note: This article is adapted from Cohen (2006).
THE COWORKERS FROM HELL

We've all known them. They arrive late or unprepared for work, then take extra-long breaks. They do the minimum possible to get by. They never volunteer or offer to help others. They are concerned only with what's best for themselves, their own shift, or their own work unit. Frequent statements: "It's not my job," "I can't help you."

They create conflict: arguing over assignments, questioning every decision, complaining incessantly, arguing with coworkers in the presence of others. They refuse to attend or participate at meetings designed to address concerns, then complain about problems that they are not willing to help solve.

They are unstable, bringing their personal problems to work and subject to extreme mood swings. If they have problems with coworkers, they yell, swear, interrupt, call them names, or engage in threatening words or actions.

They are judgmental of and condescending toward coworkers, especially new employees and those with lesser skills or experience. They are quick to criticize, reluctant to credit. When approached by a new employee in need of help, their nonverbal behaviors say, "I'm too busy—figure it out for yourself."

They may be slow and unable to keep up with the pace. They also may be unwilling or unable to perform specific tasks, forcing others to pick up the slack. They are rigid regarding change. They are sources of negativity, finding fault with their work team, their departments, and the organization. Yet they don't own their mistakes. They are thin-skinned and easily offended. They get defensive when given honest, respectful performance feedback.

COMMUNICATION PRACTICES THAT NURTURE EFFECTIVE TEAMWORK

- **Positivity**: People have positive things to say about their jobs and about those with whom they work.
- **Skill**: People are good at what they do; they are skillful and resourceful.
- **Enjoyment**: Work is fun; a sense of humor is an asset.
- **Improvement**: The focus is on how to make things better. Rather than complain or whine, people look for answers.
- **Flexibility**: People are adaptable and open to change.
- **Constructiveness**: Team members are built up rather than torn down; they feel motivated, important, and effective.
- **Enthusiasm**: People have a high level of energy in pursuit of positive outcomes.
- **Good Intention**: People prefer peace over conflict.
- **Self-control**: People stay calm during frustrating situations.
- **Learning**: Challenging situations are welcomed.
- **Diversity**: Things go well with a wide variety of people; there's a high tolerance for diverse cultures, personalities, work styles, and perspectives.
- **Self-discipline**: People come to work as scheduled, prepared for work.
- **Cooperation**: When finished with their own work, people offer help to others without being asked.
- **Openness**: If people have conflicts with coworkers, they talk to (not about) them at the earliest possible opportunity, calmly, directly, honestly, and respectfully.
• **Courtesy:** People exchange pleasantries; they say please and thank you. They say hello when they meet and goodbye when they part. They can be friendly without being friends.

**LEARNING TO MANAGE CONFLICT IN EFFECTIVE TEAMS**

Children do not necessarily learn effective communication and conflict resolution skills in the home. Respect for peers and authority is not always evident in the public schools. Therefore, by the time little Tim and Jane grow up and enter the workforce, they may not know how to manage disagreements, respond to constructive criticism, or respectfully ask for what they want. In order to be contributing members of effective teams, they will need to learn effective listening, conflict management, and problem-solving skills.

Conflict is not bad or good. Conflict just is. It is a natural and inherent part of work. How people deal with conflict can be good or bad, constructive or destructive. Do we demonstrate good will or malice toward coworkers when problems arise? Do we avoid conflict and therefore not address important issues? Do we attend only to what is in our own individual and immediate self-interest, or do we consider what is best for the team in the long run?

**Techniques for Managing Conflict**

*Don’t Expect Perfection.* Maximize people’s strengths, minimize their weaknesses, and adjust to their imperfections. If you expect perfection in others, you are destined to lead a life of self-righteous indignation. If you expect perfection in yourself, you are destined to lead a life of guilt and frustration. You won’t be able to live up to your own expectations.

*Choose Your Fights.* With Discretion. Some problems just aren’t worth complaining about. If you gripe about every little thing, you will gain the reputation of being a complainer or agitator. Furthermore, nobody will take you seriously when a real problem requires attention. The most credible employees are those individuals who don’t often complain. When they do raise a concern, they are listened to because they have earned the right to be heard. Don’t go to the mat on everything.

*Talk Directly to the Person With Whom You Are Having a Problem.* Understand that when you talk negatively about people, it will get back to them, but in a distorted fashion. Feelings will be hurt. Communication breaks down. Managing conflicts by talking directly, honestly, and respectfully to others takes courage. But if you don’t ask for what you want, you may never get it, and not taking this risk may be the greater risk. After all, people can’t read your mind.

*Talk to the Person Behind Closed Doors.* Talk to the person with a spirit of confidentiality and noncompetitiveness. Don’t criticize anyone in public—it only leads to embarrassment and provokes defensiveness. Allow people to save face and maintain self-esteem.
Be Cool, Calm, and Collected. When you confront the person, stay centered by taking the time to figure out what you are thinking and feeling. Don’t lead with your emotions. Avoid yelling, swearing, interrupting, pounding the table, or stomping your feet. Don’t call people names. Be mindful of the effect that your messages (both verbal and nonverbal) will have on the other person. If you are so angry that you don’t trust what you’re going to say next, don’t say anything at all. Take a time out. Words said in anger can sting the soul. They can leave emotional scars that last long after physical wounds are healed. Your feedback should make it easier, not harder, for the person to change in the desired direction.

Be Issue-Oriented, Not Personality-Oriented. Level with the person, don’t level the person. Simply describe the person’s behavior (without attacking him or her) and the negative impact this behavior has on you. Then describe what he or she could do differently to meet your expectations.

Be Open to Different Interpretations of the Same Event. You don’t have a corner on the truth. You only have your perceptions of reality. Simply share your point of view with the person and ask for his perspective.

Don’t Sandbag, Collect Misdeeds, or Allow Resentment to Build. Deal with issues one at a time as they arise. The best feedback is timely feedback. Therefore, speak to the person as soon as possible after the event occurs, providing that you have control over your emotions.

The Truth Does Not Always Set You Free, and Brutal Honesty Is Not Always a Virtue. It would be a dangerous world if we always said what’s on our mind when we’re thinking it, to the person we’re thinking it about. Once you say something in anger, you cannot take it back. The person may forgive you, but he or she may never forget what you said, and may always wonder whether that is how you really feel: Did the truth really come out in a fit of anger?

Give Everyone You Deal With an Opportunity to Save Face. This is particularly important when it is obvious that the person made a mistake. Give the person room to maneuver by providing opportunity to admit wrongdoing. Don’t rub the person’s nose in it and avoid saying, “I told you so.”

Know When to Terminate the Discussion. If, in the course of a confrontation, you have repeated your best arguments more than once, it is likely that you are going around in circles. Agree to disagree for the time being, and come back to the discussion later if necessary.

Get a Third-Party Resource. A third party, whenever appropriate, can be a sounding board or can help mediate the conflict. Someone with psychological distance and objectivity can provide advice on how to handle the conflict. This person may be your manager or a human resource professional. Choose someone whose advice you value, but who will not necessarily tell you what you want to hear.

Put the Conflict Behind You and Start a New Day. Not all work conflicts can be resolved, but they must be effectively managed. Don’t get stuck in conflict mode.
There will always be conflict in a close work relationship, but in between the conflicts, reaffirm the positive aspects of working together.

**Good Professional Relationships Do Not Mean You Have to Be Friends.** You don’t have to like someone personally to work effectively with him or her. Don’t use personal dislikes as an excuse for a breakdown in communication. Certainly it is easier to work with someone you like, but it is not a precondition for a successful working relationship. Regardless of your feelings toward the person, effective communication and cooperation are necessary to achieve department objectives.

**Don’t Violate Any of the Above Principles Even When the Other PersonChooses to Ignore Them.** You are not responsible for what others say or do, but you are always responsible for your own behavior regardless of provocation.

Creating a Protocol for Conflict Management

Groups should develop a structured process to solve problems with one another and hold each other accountable for adhering to it. Here are some suggested elements of a conflict management protocol.

**Speak Up.** Find your sense of entitlement to stand up and support yourself. No matter who you are, no matter your title or status, you deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Your feelings are legitimate and valuable.

**Intervene Early.** Try to solve the problem at the earliest and most informal levels by talking directly to the coworker before getting others involved.

**Establish a Goal for the Interaction.** Determine in advance what you want to accomplish when the discussion is completed:

- “What exactly do I want or need?”
- “Is my expectation reasonable?”
- “How is this expectation not being met?”
- “What do I want the person to start (do more of) or stop (do less of) to satisfy my need?”

**Empathize With the Other Person.** Demonstrate an appreciation that the person’s perceptions, right or wrong, are real and legitimate to him or her. People’s perceptions are their reality. Anticipate the person’s potential for defensiveness, anger, resentment, confusion, or feelings of being treated unfairly. Anticipate the possibility that the person might cry, sulk, withdraw, or shout. How will you respond? Be prepared to handle any of these possibilities.

**Don’t Make Assumptions About the Person’s Intentions.** You don’t know what the other person is thinking; his or her intentions are invisible to you. They exist only in the person’s heart and mind.

**Package Your Message in a Constructive Manner.** Don’t use judgmental terms that will induce defensiveness (“You are being inconsiderate.” “You are being lazy.”
"You are so rude!") More effective ways to begin the conversation include the following:

- "Help me understand why you did that."
- "My perception is . . ."
- "What you did (describe behavior) had this effect on me: I thought/felt/needed . . ."

Involving a Third Party When Needed

If you anticipate denial or defensiveness, or if you are afraid of making the situation worse, consider utilizing a third-party resource for assistance in managing the conflict. But don’t go to just anyone for assistance. Ensure that the person from whom you seek counsel

- has good listening skills,
- is objective, with no personal self-interest in the outcome of the conflict,
- has credibility,
- can be trusted to give sound advice,
- has common sense,
- will maintain confidentiality, and
- is prepared to tell you what you don’t necessarily want to hear. The person can empathize with what you are going through, but may not necessarily agree with how you are handling the situation.

Make certain that you clarify your expectations of the selected third-party resource: Are you using this person as a sounding board? If so, you want the person to understand what happened but do nothing with the information. Do you want the person to offer you advice on how to handle the situation? If yes, ask her to coach you on what to say or even role-play a conversation with your coworker. Do you want the person to intervene on your behalf, such as bringing both parties together to facilitate a dialogue? But don’t expect the third-party resource to do your talking for you. That’s your job.

When You Are Confronted

1. Listen to what the person has to say. Don’t automatically act defensively.
2. Seek to understand before you seek to be understood. When someone is upset, his or her fundamental need is to be understood, not to be agreed with. The best way to lower someone’s anxiety is to actively listen and ask open-ended, nonjudgmental questions that demonstrate genuine curiosity:
   - "Can you say a little more about how you see this?"
   - "How do you see this situation differently?"
   - "What impact have my actions had on you?"
3. Verify your understanding by summarizing what you heard the person say:
   - "What I hear you telling me is . . ."
   - "Let me summarize what you’re asking of me."
4. If the responses you get are not entirely clear, keep digging:
   • "I'm still unclear about something."
   • "What I'm still confused about is . . ."

5. Empathize and apologize whenever appropriate:
   • "I'm sorry that you're so upset. This wasn't my intent."
   • "I can see this is really hard for you. Thank you for sharing it with me."
   • "I am trying to understand this better. Can you tell me again what is it that I said or did that made you so angry?"
   • "Can you give me an example of what you're saying I do?"
   • "What is it exactly that you would like me to do next time so as to avoid upsetting you?"

6. Describe the situation from your point of view:
   • "My perspective on the event is different. I would like to share with you how I see it and get your response."
   • "Let me share with you my perception of what happened."

7. Be prepared to negotiate:
   • "Here's what I'm willing to do. Is this acceptable?"
   • "Here's what I need from you. Is that okay?"
   • "What do you need from me to make it easier to do what I'm asking?"
   • "I can do what you're asking of me, but I first need this from you."

8. If necessary, agree to disagree. Discuss with the coworker where you go from here. Not all conflicts can be resolved, but they need to be effectively managed or customer service and team morale suffer.

Managing conflict is almost never about getting the facts. It is about different perceptions, judgments, and values. It is about what a particular situation means to the coworkers involved. Effective conflict resolution requires assertive communication, active listening, problem solving, achieving closure, and moving on (Stone, Patton, Heen, & Fisher, 1999).

REFERENCES

Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to Michael H. Cohen, MA at canoepress@yahoo.com