



Supervisor NEWSLETTER

Employee Assistance Program
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Tips for Managing Disagreements

Managing interpersonal differences isn't easy. But knowing what's at the heart of them can often equip you to prevent them. Common culprits for conflict stem from incomplete information, wrong or incompatible goals, ineffective or inappropriate methods, or antagonistic or other negative feelings.

However, when the damage is done and disagreement is at hand, there are several guiding principles that can make a positive outcome more likely. The next time you are challenged to intervene in a disagreement, consider these guide posts to help you on the path:

Preserve dignity and respect

Preserve and protect the dignity of all stakeholders, including yourself. In a heated discussion, it's easy to say something demeaning. Keep your focus on issues, not personalities.

Until proved otherwise, assume the other person is expressing a legitimate concern when disagreeing. Even if someone who disagrees with you appears stubborn, you won't get closer to resolving a dispute by putting him down. When you show sincere respect for people who disagree with you, they will be less inclined to be defensive. You can avoid those energy-draining, win-lose battles that are really about saving face.

Listen with empathy

When you listen to others' views, put yourself in their shoes. By so doing, you convey the message, "I respect you as a person. Your thoughts and feelings are important to me whether or not I agree

with them." See from the other person's perspective; feel the speaker's emotional state. When ideas conflict with what you already believe, notice if you discount the speaker's message. To get the full information that is basic to managing differences, you need to listen with neutrality that suspends critical judgment.

Give your full attention to appreciating why the other person sees the same situation differently from you. Be receptive to more than the words you hear--they always carry more meaning than their explicit content. When the other person feels heard you will have taken an important, though subtle, step toward resolving your disagreement.

Find common ground

Overarching mutual concern and interest paves the way to move from disagreement to win-win resolution. The only disagreements of any real importance are those that involve people in interdependent relationships. Therefore, inherent in mutual dependence is the existence of common ground.

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In a dispute, it is tempting to force or expect others to change their basic orientation or behavioral style. People change basic patterns only with difficulty, only where there is trust, and only when they believe it is in their best interest to change. Until trust and respect are established, what helps is a shared larger vision and common long-range goals.

Honor diversity

Different viewpoints spur the creative search for resolution. In contrast, when people converge quickly and reach instant agreement, the process is sterile. Nothing new has been added. Part of managing disagreement is reaching the best solution, not simply conforming to what one person wishes.

When you're the lone dissenter, it's tempting to surrender your conviction to conform to more popular views. Your gift to others is your independent point of view. Be firm about the issues that truly matter to you. In addition, respect the interests of all parties involved. Once you learn to add your ideas to the ideas of others, you can develop a more creative and successful resolution. Remember that diversity holds the seeds for constructive change.

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Convert styles to strategies

A style is a habitual, reactive mode of handling conflict. It is predictable to those who interact with you. A style sometimes fits the situation, sometimes doesn't. Your effectiveness in dealing with conflict depends on making a deliberate choice of converting a style for managing disagreement into a strategy for managing disagreement.

Making your choice consciously requires that you not plunge into a disagreement using a familiar, comfortable, well-worn style. Your aim is to choose consciously the approach or combination that works best under each specific circumstance. In short, your challenge is to convert *styles to strategies*.

Create equality with a *neutral style*

- **Try deciding by rule**—Make a joint agreement to use an objective rule or criterion as the basis for choosing among specified alternatives, such as a lottery, majority rule, seniority, or policy.
- **Coexist**—Agree to disagree. In this style, the two parties pursue differences independently, and they agree to follow separate paths for a period of time. Use this strategy if two parties of equal power are adamant about the merits of their positions and no other agreement can be reached.
- **Bargaining**—Trade, take turns, or split the difference by each party taking a piece of a difficult task.

Build trust with a *flexible style*

- **Yield**—Apply this strategy when the issue is important to the other person, but minor to you, or you have more to gain by not resisting. This approach can also help preserve the relationship.
- **Release**—Use this if you are in a position of power and there is a low risk of irreversible loss, or an opportunity to encourage another's development.
- **Collaborate**—Use it if the issues are too important to be compromised and commitment is needed. It is useful in team building and strategic decision-making, but keep in mind that it requires time, trust, and interpersonal competence.

Support your position with a *firm style*

- **Maintain**—Strategically *wait* when you need to collect information, let emotions cool, enlist allies, deal with higher priorities, allow recent changes to stabilize, or let circumstances resolve the issues.
- **Smoothing**—With this strategy, you accentuate similarities and downplay differences. By focusing exclusively on the benefits of your ideas, without emphasizing (or even mentioning) the alternatives, you sell your ideas. Smoothing is useful when you want your preferences to prevail.
- **Dominate**—If you possess, or are perceived to possess, authority or power, you may apply this strategy judiciously to ensure physical safety and well-being. Be aware that overuse of this approach diminishes its power.

Remember, your EAP is here to consult and support you! Call us anytime at (800) 777-4114 for assistance.

