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Four Steps to Resolve Conflict

by Richard M. Highsmith, M.S. The Leader's Institute

Human disagreement remains inevitable. When conflict is not addressed, each side becomes defensive, and a person who is defensive will rarely see the logic of the other's position. These four steps will help you end conflict more quickly.



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1. Look for some area of common ground as soon as possible.

Nine years ago, I owned a small manufacturing company. We had grown to the point we needed to triple our rented space. I located a building and intended spending a sizable amount of money renovating the space, including adding air conditioning. The owner presented me with an onerous rental agreement. We disagreed, continued to disagree and eventually broke negotiations. I lost a good location and he lost a tenant who would have spent money upgrading his building.

If your ultimate goal is to persuade the other person, you need to find some "common ground." How are your two positions similar? What points can both agree upon? Tear down the defensive walls so both parties can find a logical, satisfying conclusion.

Let's go back to my manufacturing company, needing more space. The next building I found was twice the size I needed. It was farther from my home and required considerable renovation. This time, the owner began our discussion by telling me how much he wanted me as a tenant. He showed me how the building had showroom and office

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space that was already air-conditioned. There was ample manufacturing space. I mentioned my willingness to air condition additional parts of the building and sign a seven-year lease. In short, we both looked for common ground.

This common ground gave us momentum to construct a lease to benefit both parties. Whenever we reached areas of disagreement, we found it easier to work together. He reduced the rent to match our budget, giving us access to a space larger than we thought we needed. I increased the length of the lease from 7 to 10 years, giving him a valuable, long-term tenant.

Using the concept of common ground, you can find your way to satisfactory conclusions much more often. To resolve conflict more quickly, look for common ground.

2. When you are in the wrong, admit it.

Are you always right? If you answered, "Yes", go talk to someone who knows you well. You will likely find they have a different response.

I once had an assistant manager who was extremely difficult to supervise. Each time we attempted to discuss a topic of improvement, he began blaming his subordinates, denying the specifics or using the SODDI defense. You know. "Some Other Dude Did It."

I tried discussing his resistance to supervisory counseling. His response. "No, not me!" This story has an unhappy ending. Since he believed himself beyond guilt, above slipups and never in need of supervision, I could not work with him. I can still remember his look of astonishment when I fired him.

In one company I owned it was my responsibility to gather all our vendor's prices and determine bid quotes. In creating a large bid for a commercial project, I miscalculated one vendor's price. Our final bid was the lowest and we won the contract. When ordering the components, I quickly learned my mistake. This error would cost my company tens of thousands of dollars.

As President I could have shifted blame and covered up my error. Instead I called my key employees together and explained what I had done. Everyone got involved in finding ways to save money on this project. We didn't make any money on the job, but with the team pulling together we didn't lose our shirts either.

Why was everyone willing to help ease the pain? It was because I admitted my mistake openly and quickly. I was willing to say, "I've broken this plate and can't put it back together without help."

The next time you "break a plate," admit you're human and need help. See how quickly others come running with the glue.

3. Admit one of your own poor decisions before pointing out a similar error by others.

My first job as a supervisor was at a residential childcare facility. I had been a childcare worker and was promoted over my former peers. My boss, Larry, had worked at the facility for years. He too began his career as a childcare worker and was now Superintendent. After my promotion, Larry told me, "You have a really tough job. I know. When I was in your position I made every mistake in the book. Would you mind if from time to time I point out areas where you could make

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improvements?" I consented.

At my first management meeting, I thought it would be a great opportunity for me to resolve several childcare worker grievances. I brought up topics which were not on the agenda. This tactic was not well received.

After the meeting Larry asked me to lunch. He told me when he was a new supervisor he took advantage of a visit by a County Commissioner to bring up some matters he felt weren't being properly addressed by the facility's then Superintendent. The Commissioner referred him back to proper channels and Larry was "written up" for failure to follow the chain of command. He pointed out to me how important it was to follow existing procedures. This allowed other managers the opportunity to gather facts and discuss the issues intelligently. I learned how presenting non-agenda items would be counterproductive because the discussions would be based on emotions rather than facts.

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Larry consistently applied this leadership principle. Anytime he observed me doing or saying something potentially problematic, he would matter-of-factly say, "I remember back when I." and he would proceed to tell me about his similar blunder. This indirect coaching allowed me to save face and helped me to not make the same mistakes. I continue to be grateful for the leadership lessons I learned from him.

Telling people what they are doing wrong builds walls. Nobody likes hearing they have made a mistake. On the other hand, people appreciate hearing they are not the first person to "Push" when the sign on the door reads, "Pull." Admitting your own mistake helps establish a connection. Your willingness to share your experience along with the lesson you learned will be more readily accepted and their behavior more likely to change.

4. Mend fences whenever possible.

When I was President of a company doing wholesale work for the hospitality industry, one client owned a chain of restaurants. We had gotten verbal confirmation for over a half million dollars of upcoming business, but a couple of months passed and we hadn't received the purchase order.

I asked the Office Manager if she knew of any issues. She indicated there had been some difficulty in an accounts receivable billing a couple of months previously and harsh words had been exchanged.

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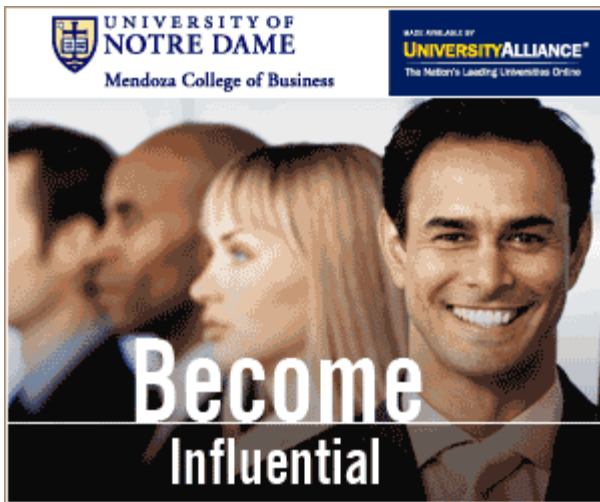
The client had finally paid the account in full. When asked further, she explained she had made several errors in the invoices and the buyer for the restaurant had been very "difficult" on the phone. Our former bookkeeper had been "shouted" at and the Office Manager had "straightened them out."

With a sinking feeling, I called the V.P. of Operations at the restaurant. He also told me their V.P. of Finance had dropped us as a vendor. Several of the projects verbally promised to us had been awarded to a competitor. He told me there was nothing he could do about the situation because the V.P. of Finance decided which vendors were approved for use.

After being unable to reach the V.P. by phone, I composed an email offering sincere apologies for the difficulty her department had experienced with our billing process. I informed her the bookkeeper had been let go and we had upgraded the position by hiring someone with a B.A. in accounting. I closed by requesting a face-to-face meeting to personally assure her I would do everything in my power to ensure the relationship worked more smoothly.

This principle sounds like common sense, but it is uncommon in practice. Relationships have ended with one party feeling slighted by the other and neither being willing to make amends. The longer you wait, the more the problem rankles. Someone must make the first move and that someone is you.

Richard Highsmith, rick@leadersinstitute.com, is a senior instructor for The Leader's Institute. He has twenty-five years experience training and coaching. He has built and sold two successful businesses. To learn more about becoming a High Impact Leader visit our website at <http://www.leadersinstitute.com> or call Rick toll-free at 1-800-872-7830 X102.



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