

Moving Conflict To Agreement

by Kathleen Rich-New



Managing conflict is a tricky business, or perhaps a better term to use is clarifying conflict. Many women and men will avoid conflict at all costs. After a while, the cost of avoiding conflict can be career gone astray. Here are some ideas on how to understand and handle conflict with better results.

Conflict occurs for two reasons:

- Different objectives
- Differences in how to accomplish the objective

To clarify conflict, listen to what is being said to determine the specific points of contention.

If Different Objectives seem to be the culprit...

1. Restate or clarify the reason for the meeting in terms of the decision to be made or the end results for internal or external customers. Always keep the customer impact in all your decisions. For example: "My understanding of why we here today is to determine our response to customer complaints so we will keep their business and possibly increase it. Is that your understanding?" Sometimes we jump into problem solving before we understand the problem.
2. The participation of others in the decision needs to be real, not just advisory. If the meeting is to gather input, then get their input and you make the decision.
3. Narrow your decision to just one that stands alone, no ifs, ands or buts in it. For example, "We are here to decide how to reduce turnover and decrease our recruiting costs." Those are two different decisions that need two different discussions and two sets of decision making criteria.



If Differences in How to Accomplish the Objective are at issue...

1. Before you begin, decide how to decide. Agree on what success would look like, and then decide what criteria will be used to make the decision. Narrow your criteria to 3 or 4. Examples of decision making criteria include:

- Is it cost effective?
- Do we have the expertise necessary for the work?
- Is it achievable? Are there proven strategies or interventions?
- How many people will be affected by this issue?
- Are we addressing a gap or is this a duplication of effort?
- Is the problem going to get worse? Do we need to act now?
- What if we don't take action?
- Are the staff and/or customers interested or excited?

2. List all your options.
3. Collect the information you need based on your decision making criteria. If you use research studies you can now set the parameters of the study for exactly what you need and will use. For example is it cost effective? Are our customers enthusiastic? Does it solve the issue?
4. Rank your options. Everything is ranked above or below something else using your criteria. Set up a matrix with the criteria down the side and the options across the top. Then force-rank the options per criteria and total the numbers.

	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3
Criteria A	1	2	3
Criteria B	3	1	2
Criteria C	3	2	1
Total	7	5	6

In this case Option 2 is rated as the best option.

2. Reach agreement. Review the results of the ranking and discuss if this is the option that will give you the results you want. Disagreeing here is not the same as conflict. You are evaluating making a good decision vs. a right decision. You know when you have made a good decision because you clarified what end result you want and selected the criteria to evaluate options. It might not be possible to know if it was the right decision.
3. 5 questions to ask as you evaluate your decision. Was the process open and equitable? Was the decision made? Have we made a quality decision? Will there be little or no re-work? Will people get excited about the idea? ♦

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