

Conflict Can Be Opportunity

For Release: Week of February 22, 2021

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"A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty."
– Sir Winston Churchill

Conflict is challenging – I don't enjoy it and I dread when I know in advance that conflict is headed my way. Most people perceive "conflict" as a difficulty rather than as an opportunity. Those who view conflict as the difficulty in every opportunity are not necessarily pessimists, however they may not be viewing the conflict as a creative dynamic. The reality is, no matter what you do or how you act, there will always be some conflict — especially when you serve as a community board member.

Conflict can be both positive and negative. Conflict allows people to learn about a problem from different sides, and often the most creative ideas and solutions emerge from conflict. Negative aspects of conflict can involve frustration or confusion and sometimes lead to violence. The key to approaching conflict constructively is to recognize it as a process to be managed, not something to be avoided or eliminated.

Managing conflict requires certain skills and techniques that may not always be easy to implement.

For example, when a person learns to paint it involves learning strokes and techniques to create an image. However, only after continuous practice does the person finally become an artist. You may think of conflict management as an art that benefits everyone through learning the skills, but it takes practice implementing the techniques to be a skilled conflict manager.

The skills and techniques outlined here work best when the person applying them carries the attitude that conflict is about a problem that needs solving, rather than something to win.

Listen Actively

Listening involves more than simply hearing the words spoken, it also requires active involvement that includes understanding, acknowledging, and responding. To make sure you understand what the person has said summarize by saying out loud, *"What I think I heard you say was ... Is that right?"*

Keep Emotions in Check

Although Newton is famous for stating, "for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction," he was referring to objects, not people. *Objects react, but people can chose not to.* You can't change your emotions, but you can decide how you want to act.

Separate People from the Problem

In every conflict there exists both the content of the problem and the human relationships. As a consequence, "people and the problem" often become entangled in discussions that sometimes lead to treating people and the problem as one.

Reframe

Reframing is a powerful method to reinterpret a statement or comment into a problem-solving frame. For example, if someone is yelling and screaming, don't think of the person as being disrespectful and rude, but reframe your perception of that person as having limited skills in communication. (Easier said than done, right?) In addition, help the other person reframe the conflict into a problem by asking for their advice. For example, *"What would you suggest I do?" "Knowing what my interests are, what would you do if you were in my shoes?"*

Conflict is just a part of our lives. Let's work together to turn a little conflict into a lot of opportunity. For more information about leadership and community vitality, visit the Southwind Extension website at www.southwind.k-state.edu or find us on Facebook.