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5 Tips For Using Kindness To Defuse Conflict

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 21 November 2024

Kindness is not usually a word one associates with conflict. When a teammate feels wronged by a colleague, the focus tends to be on establishing who's right and who's wrong. Emotions are often running high, both in the heat of the moment and after one has dwelt on the situation. Summoning the desire and generosity to show kindness in a conflict situation is challenging.

Yet, kindness and conflict are more closely connected than you might think. Kindness is sometimes used as a reason to avoid addressing difficult issues, with people telling themselves it's "kinder" to stay silent to avoid more upset. However, this approach can be misplaced, as the issue is likely to fester and grow, and trust within the relationship will likely erode. This is why dealing with conflict can be an act of kindness for all involved.

Workplace mediators are used to hearing mediation parties describe the impact of perceived unkindness on a working relationship. They also see how, when one party shows a gesture of kindness to the other during a mediation, it can lead to a breakthrough.

Kindness is key to moving forward in conflict. It communicates care for the other person, signals positive intent and a willingness to connect and build bridges. So, next time you're experiencing conflict at work, here are five tips to help you unlock the potential of kindness.

Tip #1. Recognize that kindness won't be your first response

In a conflict situation, people often feel threatened. This leads to an instinct to defend oneself with counter-accusations or blame; in other words, to retaliate with unkindness. The first tip, therefore, is to be aware that kindness is unlikely to be your initial reaction or that of the other person. Knowing this, you can choose to respond differently.

Tip #2. Prepare to be kind

Before engaging in a difficult conversation, take time to prepare. Consider where and how to have the conversation, for example, away from a busy office area where you could be overheard, or on a one-to-one video call. Rehearse how to introduce the topic so that it doesn't come across as an attack. And think about how to express what you want to say in a way that is respectful.

Tip #3. Demonstrate kindness in conflict

One of the most effective ways to show kindness is by listening. Give the other person your full attention and listen to understand rather than plan your response. This will make the other person feel heard, which is a key human need, and it will also help you better understand their perspective.

Beyond listening, kindness can also be expressed through words and by offering time to explore a situation of conflict in a nonjudgmental way.

Tip #4. Show your appreciation

Another helpful tip is to show appreciation to the other person. You can do this by acknowledging signs of care or kindness from the other person, and thanking them for it. Thank them also for sharing their views, which will make it easier for them to be able to listen to yours. These acknowledgments tend to reduce tension and show the other person that having these conversations is worthwhile.

Tip #5. Be kind to yourself

Dealing with conflict can be uncomfortable because many of us lack the skills to address issues with confidence. Speaking with someone you are in conflict with can be emotionally and physically draining. And yet, when it's done well, it is also energizing and rewarding. During a conflict conversation, give yourself space to reflect and gather your thoughts. Even experienced mediators need reflection time, which is why mediation sessions are often structured with regular breaks for the parties and the mediator to pause and reflect on how the conversation is going.

Most people don't go to work with the intention of being unkind. Often inadvertently, actions and behaviors can be perceived as hurtful, which can lead to conflict. In these moments, showing kindness may feel counterintuitive but is often the key to resolution. Shifting to respectful language will defuse tension and enable a more caring and collaborative conversation. By taking the first step and making the effort to be kind, you may find that kindness can be contagious.