

Rule 1: Begin with the End in Mind

From Greg Giesen's Eight Simple Rules to Managing Conflict

- Mediator:** Before we begin today's mediation, I'd like to ask each of you to share what your desired outcome is for today's meeting. Bob, why don't you go first.
- Bob:** Okay. I guess I'd like to walk out of here with a better understanding of how to communicate with Jerry.
- Mediator:** Bob, can you be more specific.
- Bob:** Sure. Jerry and I have been butting heads a lot lately and I don't know what I'm doing that's triggering him so much.
- Mediator:** So you want to know if you are bothering Jerry when you talk to him and if so, how to make that different.
- Bob:** Yes.
- Mediator:** And Jerry, what's your desired outcome?
- Jerry:** Frankly, I just want Bob to leave me alone. Just let me do my job.
- Mediator:** Jerry, let me ask you this...Is it the way Bob approaches you or the frequency that's the issue for you?
- Jerry:** The frequency. Bob is an okay guy...(Mediator interrupts)
- Mediator:** Can you say that to Bob.
- Jerry:** Bob, you're an okay guy. I just need you to leave me alone to do my job. You interrupt me all the time and I can't get my work done.
- Mediator:** So a desired outcome for you Jerry is to get more uninterrupted time from Bob.
- Jerry:** Yes.

And the mediation goes on...

What the dialogue above demonstrates is Rule 1: **Begin with the End in Mind**.

In my opinion, we are more effective in conflict when we are prepared, focused on a desired outcome, and have a plan. Granted not all conflicts allow us the luxury to do all three but I would argue that those types of conflict require a much different strategy anyway. Let's focus on the ongoing difficult relationship first.

Very simply, we are better negotiators when we know what we want and have a strategy on how to get it. When we are goal-focused in even the most challenging of challenging situations, we are less distracted by everything else that often prevents us from a successful resolution (i.e., personality differences, disposition—ours and theirs, group dynamics, and even the immediate surrounding environment). We are also better able to lead with our thoughts and not our emotions. This is how we need to be in conflicting situations.

When I mediate a conflict between two people, I include a coaching session with each person prior to the actual mediation. The purpose of this added step is three-fold. First, I help both parties identify a desired outcome and a win-win strategy for the mediation session. Second, I establish a level of trust between the parties and myself. Since part of my job is to create a safe space for the mediation, it is essential that I'm trusted as a mediator, facilitator, and coach. Third, by taking upfront time to prepare for the mediation, both parties are ready to hit the ground running the moment we walk into the room. That's because we are all focused on outcomes.

I want to mention here that I'm not advocating for a third-party mediator to help resolve a conflict. I believe there is a time and place when a third-party should be considered but only as a last resort strategy. What I am advocating for is taking the time to focus on desired outcomes before engaging in a conflicting dynamic with another person. Lead with the head and not the heart.

But what about those "in-the-moment" conflicts that don't allow for any kind of preparation, you ask?

Have a Plan B...an escape route. As mentioned, we don't do conflict well when we aren't prepared. What's the point of getting caught up in a conflict or interpersonal argument when all we are going to do is get mad, defensive, emotional, and ultimately damaging the relationship at hand. My advice—don't engage! If it's a stranger—avoid, leave, or let it go. If it is a colleague, friend or family member—postpone the discussion. You can decide later on how to proceed or even if you need to.

There is one more influencing factor to consider when we talk about **Rule # 1: Begin with the End in Mind**.

Let me ask you this:

When you think about the word conflict, does it bring up more negative or positive connotations and why?

When you reflect on your own past conflicts, would you say that you generally handled them effectively, ineffectively, or avoided them like the plague?

You see, our past experiences with conflict form our present day *auto-pilot* response. In other words, if our overriding perception of conflict is negative, we'll be more likely to avoid it, deny it, mismanage it, sit on it, resist it, or project it onto the other person. And we'll do this without much thought. This is because we associate conflict as a threat and automatically go into self-protective mode...which, by the way, isn't necessarily an effective response to the situation at hand.

Conversely, if we have had relative good past experiences with conflict, we'll be more inclined to resolve it, encourage it, address it, move past it, and bring it out in the open. As a result, our auto-pilot response is more around resolution and collaboration.

What does this all mean?

It means that if we have a pre-disposition to view conflict as negative, our ability to focus on outcomes is even more important. In other words, there will be a constant pull towards old patterns if we fail to keep our eye on the goal.

Case in point: My auto-pilot response to conflict is to internalize it. I have a tendency to go inside my head where I proceed to analyze the problem to death. Sometimes I find a resolution and sometimes I end up doing nothing. Either way, I don't always involve the other person in this process. Sometimes they don't even know I've resolved the issue. Can you see how that could be problematic?

So in my case, internalizing conflict won't help me if I value and want to maintain a relationship with the person I'm in conflict with. Hence, I need to be mindful of my tendency and stay focus on outcomes in order to steer the resolution in a win-win direction.

So in conclusion, Begin with the End in Mind means:

- Preparing ahead of time
- Identifying a desired outcome prior to engagement
- Seeking win-win resolutions where both parties benefit
- Visualizing a positive conversation beforehand and setting a positive intent
- Overriding all auto-responses that don't serve you in the moment
- Walking away from conflicts that don't matter or involve people you don't have a relationship with or are emotionally packed, thus preventing you from being focused on outcomes

Stay tuned for Rule 2: Stay Off the Ladder!

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