

Rule 7b: What to Say and How to Say It

From Greg Giesen's Eight Simple Rules to Managing Conflict

As I have mentioned before in this series (The Eight Simple Rules to Managing Conflict), the biggest key to effectively resolving conflict is preparation. When we have time to prepare, we do much better in resolving conflict than when it is thrust upon us and all we can do is react.

When I mediate conflicts, I include a preparation and coaching phase with both parties individually before I ever bring them together. This added phase is critical to a successful mediation, resulting in both parties being prepared, goal-focused, and ready for resolution.

Below is the two-step process I use for successfully mediating and resolving conflict between two people.



Part I: The Preparation Phase

The first step in the preparation phase is to conduct a thorough self-assessment on the conflict itself. Below are the questions I use to help conflicting parties think through the conflict and prepare for mediation. These self-reflection questions are also useful for the typical everyday conflicts and disagreements that we all face.

1. Is the conflict about an isolated event that shows little consistency with the rest of the relationship, or is it the latest in a series of conflicts revealing problems within the relationship as a whole?
2. Are my expectations realistic on how I think things need to be resolved?
3. Am I letting my expectations be shaped or distorted by other people not involved in the conflict?
4. Are my expectations taking into account the other party's needs, values, and constraints?
5. What have I done to contribute to the cause and perpetuation of the conflict?
6. What misperceptions might the other party have of me?
7. What misperceptions might I have of the other party?
8. What is it I need differently from the other party and what would that look like?
9. What am I willing to do for the other party to show my willingness to work through our issue?

10. What are some of the workable compromises I can come to the table with?

By using these questions to self-assess and prepare, parties in conflict can put their focus more towards obtaining resolution than fault-finding. Thinking through these questions also helps remove any unwarranted emotion that's preventing moving forward in a logical manner.



Part II: The Conflict Resolution Process (Formal)

I'm calling this a "formal" process because it is to be used when both parties need a structured format, particularly in cases where the working relationship is strained. I also use the process below as my outline when mediating conflicts. Keep in mind, it can be customized to fit a variety of situations.

Step 1: The Face-to-Face Meeting

Opening

- Each party states their intentions / desired outcomes for the meeting.
- Each party acknowledges the importance of their working relationship with each other as well as the importance of reaching resolution.

Step 2: Defining Needs

- Party 1 defines the problem and the impact it is having on him/her.
- Party 2 summarizes what he/she heard.
- Party 2 defines the problem and the impact it is having on him/her.
- Party 1 summarizes what he/she heard.
- Party 1 describes what he/she needs from the other to correct the problem...and seeks agreement from Party 2.
- Party 2 describes what he/she needs from the other to correct the problem...and seeks agreement from Party 1.

Step 3: Additional Issues

- Both parties have an opportunity to raise any additional issues/concerns (following the format above).

Step 4: Summary & Wrap-Up

- Once all problems, concerns, and conflicting issues have been discussed and resolved, both parties summarize together what agreements were made.

- Both parties identify an agreed upon process to address and resolve any future conflicts/disagreements between each other.
- Both parties commit to a check-in time/date in the future to revisit the agreements and make any needed adjustments.

This format gives you an idea how the flow of the mediation should go. And all parts are essential elements, from the opening comments to setting a future check-in time between parties.

Some Final Thoughts

Probably the biggest reason why I've witnessed so many successful conflict mediations in my career is due in part to the amount of preparation that each party has been willing to put into the process. It makes my job a lot easier too because parties come to the table goal-focused towards resolution. All I have to do is provide some gentle guidance along the way.

I guess it comes down to this: If you value the relationship with the person you're in conflict with, then it's worth putting in a little extra time in the preparation phase before talking out the problem. It will not only benefit you and the other person's relationship in the long-run, but you'll also be role modeling to others what effective conflict resolution looks like. And isn't that how it should be!

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