

## TURNING DIFFERENCES INTO POSITIVE COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

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Even if you have the best intentions for success and happiness you still need to maintain strong personal relationships. It is possible to convert personality differences into positive results, and if you allow a relationship to deteriorate without attempting to resuscitate it, an opportunity will have been lost. Respect is at the heart of building any personal or community relationship; it is the glue that holds together the functioning of friends, families, and relationships, laterally, vertically, internally, or externally. Respect for the right to differ is a paramount aspect of healthy relationships, but how this is handled is the difference between resolution and revolution.

The first step is to identify the specific areas of difference. When people prefer to relate in absolutes such as “right” and “wrong”, this creates a zero sum game of “I win” and “you lose.” When situations are viewed through this lens, a power struggle may ensue and the relationship is held hostage to a perceived victory or win over another person. When, however, a situation can be seen through the lens of tolerance for differences and a stated position is merely a matter of opinion, not fact, then cooperation, compromise, or collaboration is possible. Identifying and understanding natural differences allows people to shift their position from demands to negotiation through the willingness of active listening. The gift of good listening is in itself a sign of respect.

Respect leads to accepting a person for who and what she/he is; this acceptance creates an environment of trust, which can lead to a willingness to be open to new opportunities, new collaborations, strategies, ideas, projects and improved relationships. 4Civility Ireland trains community leaders to avoid power struggles and non-productive conflict, which can drain energy, effectiveness, and diverts focus. Training elements include:

- **Communication Styles...**all people do not communicate in the same way. We do not usually examine patterns of misunderstanding in our relationships because we’re stuck in our own point of view. Good communication skills are mutual respect skills and each person should show respect for the other as well as respect for self. You demonstrate respect by listening fully and affirming that you understand what that person means and you respect yourself when you assert or propose your own legitimate self-interest without aggression.
- **Non-verbal Communication...**most communication is non-verbal. This form of communication is more covert but not any less important. It includes body language and intonation and the message being sent may be quite different from the words used. Be receptive to what is really being conveyed in the message.
- **Learning Styles...**people learn in different ways, and when you become aware of unique requirements for improved understanding and communication, you can adjust your participation to bring about greater success.
- **Differing Values...**while values must be identified and respected, there are times when conflicting values are so opposed that cooperation is extremely difficult. Respect for a person’s diametrically

opposed values is surely a sign of respect for that person, and relationships can be carved around negative interactions.

- **Boundaries...**we all have space and boundary needs. Boundaries are identified as the limits you place on the behavior of others around you. It is important to be aware of peoples' boundaries and then to use this understanding to approach them respectfully. This behavior often avoids conflict and strengthens relationships.
- **The Self...**self-respect is a vital and primary building block that supports the formation of relationships. By being aware of personal needs and styles you can create a more healthy foundation and the ensuing relationship will be more satisfying and fulfilling.
- **Individual v. Team...**balancing the person's needs against the group's needs is always a dilemma, but if this balance is not reached problems are certain to follow. Take the time to identify and address individual and team dynamics, because success is directly related to getting this right.

When people are confronted with conflict, the available styles of dealing with it are accommodating, forcing, avoiding, compromising, or collaborating with each other. What might be the most appropriate manner of reacting often depends on the circumstances, personalities, prior interactions, and the political or economic power one has over the other.

Conflict happens when people disagree about something. Despite the fact that we have a lot of similarities, as long as everyone is different from everybody else, we will have conflicts. It happens, and it is a natural part of life and work. In order to have productive and constructive interactions, there must be informal processes, skills, and techniques for approaching and resolving disagreements.

Conflict can be positive and healthy, as well as a learning and growing experience. When conflict is dealt with in a positive way it can be helpful to our personal needs and purposes. Unfortunately, conflict also has a negative impact when people not only disagree but cause hurt feelings and fracture relationships. There are options for finding a better way to manage or deal with conflict. This can be a first step on the way to improving communication, solving a problem, and building trust and cooperation. This is what we teach:

- **Assure a fair process.....**the process of interaction is just as important as the outcome. People tend to react positively when they believe they are being treated fairly; when they feel their concerns are being heard; and when they feel the game rules are neutral and fairly applied. When people believe the process is fair they are more willing to accept and support the results.
- **Don't react.....**take the necessary time to cool down and resist the natural instinct. Anybody can become angry, that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the proper degree and at the appropriate time and for the right reasons is not so easy. Give yourself the gift of time to think. This can assist you in remaining focused on identifying and discussing the real needs and interests of people, and it can also help them work past the emotional stress of the moment.
- **Deal with emotions.....**helping someone identify and acknowledge their feelings tends to reduce the intensity of those feelings and allows all parties to better focus on the underlying problems or issues. All feelings are neutral and valid to the person holding them, but it is how you deal with

the feeling that places a value on them. Don't be afraid to recognize or affirm that someone is showing their feelings so that empowering that individual may improve communication. Once you understand the role emotions play in communications, you will be able to place yourself in the other person's shoes. That old cliché means you have empathy, a quality that can be cultivated by developing genuine interest in other people.

- **Attack the problem and not the person.....**keep an objective eye on the real problem and detach your feelings about the person presenting it. Ask clarifying or probing questions to better understand the actual issue and do not blame but try to view the situation from the other person's perspective. Be careful to check assumptions and consider sharing your perceptions as a way to verify them for accuracy.
- **Practice direct communication.....**speak directly to the other person and use "I" statements such as, "I think...", "I feel...", "I need" and be clear about points of agreement. Use positive body language to show attention and ask questions to clarify that you understand. Paraphrase what has been said to demonstrate you care and understand and begin to become more conscious of your communication style and your ability to empathize with the feelings of others. As you develop a greater sensitivity to the needs and desires of family, friends, or associates you will gain their respect, which will lead to more effective communication of those unique thoughts that result from your creativity. Anytime you demonstrate a willingness to listen with a minimum of defensiveness, criticism, or impatience you are giving the gift of understanding and earning the right to have it reciprocated.
- **Look past positions to underlying interests.....**a position is a person's limited view of what solution is necessary to solve the problem, but until needs and underlying interests are ascertained it is not possible to generate options that will be mutually beneficial and agreeable. You must ask what is important and why it is before underlying motivations can identify what is fueling the dispute. Understanding one another is a give and take process and the best way to get the listening you need is to make the other person feel listened to first. Being listened to means we are taken seriously, that our ideas and feelings are known, and that what we say matters.
- **Focus on the future.....**any ongoing relationship you have with someone is longitudinal and can be altered to be constructive and improved. What just happened may be important or it may be trivial depending on how you want to make it appear just now. Remember, in a marathon you must pace yourself and believe that things will improve if only you give it the chance.

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September 2018