

RAY OF LIGHT

CRITICAL COMMUNICATION: HANDLING CONFLICT

David Pier, DMD

One of the best definitions I have heard concerning conflict is, “Something that inevitably happens whenever two or more people are together.” I do not remember who taught this to me, but the wisdom has lived on longer than my memory of the source. Conflict is inevitable and is healthy. In his book, [The Five Dysfunctions of a Team](#), Patrick Lencioni defines lack of conflict as the second dysfunction. If conflict is good and important to relationships, why is it so difficult?

The answer is in how it is handled. The following are some thoughts about handling conflict.

1. Begin by defining what it is you want.
 - What do you want for yourself?
 - What do you want for others?
 - What do you want for the relationship?

Once you have defined what you want for all involved, then ask yourself, **“What is the best way to achieve these results and how do I need to behave to make it happen?”** Notice you are asking how do **“I”** have to behave. The only behavior you can control is yours, but if you control your behavior, you are far more likely to see your desired behavior in the other person.

2. Understand that your viewpoint is not the only one involved. Listen to other points of view – the best way to be sure you will be listened to, is to listen first. Once you have listened, repeat the opposing point of view in your words to confirm that you have understood. Keep at this until the other person agrees that you have stated their point of view accurately. Only after you have confirmed that you have understood the other party have you earned the right to share your point of view.



- In Crucial Conversations by Patterson et. al., they call this creating a shared pool of meaning. By listening to all parties involved and adding all information to the pool of meaning, it becomes more likely a mutually empowering solution will be found.
3. Keep it safe. Maintain mutual trust and respect. **Trust is not only the foundation of good leadership, it is the foundation of all highly functional human relationships.** Focus on the goal of finding a mutually satisfactory solution.
 - Any time an issue is important to you personally, it is normal for emotions to become involved. When emotions rise, acknowledge, apologize whenever appropriate, and re-focus on mutual respect and positive resolution. Remember, others don't make you mad – **you** make you mad.
 4. Review your shared pool of meaning and look for paths to resolution. Here is where you look for win-win solutions. Keep looking at differing paths until you find one that solves the issue to all parties' satisfaction. If there is still disagreement, you are not done. Look for areas in the path where you are in agreement and areas where you have differences. Go back to creating a new shared pool of meaning on those differences to look at them objectively until you find a path that works for all.
 5. Finally, confirm that all parties are happy with the chosen path. If you sense there is not complete agreement, go back and look for other paths until you find the right one.
 6. Throughout the process, continue to restate your purpose. **The purpose of conflict resolution is to increase relationship.** The best way to do this is to continuously repeat steps one, two, and three.

Gary Chapman, in his book, "Now You're Speaking My Language," outlined what he called "The Four 'Fowls' of Unhealthy Communication."

Fowl #1: The Dove – Peace at any price

This is when one person placates the other to avoid wrath or an argument. This "fowl" is a people pleaser who almost never disagrees, no matter how they really feel. Being a dove relinquishes any possibility for true relationship because it causes people to grow apart.

Gary Chapman stated, "Peace at any price carries a high price tag" to marriage (or any relationship). The olive branch can be overrated!



Fowl #2: The Hawk – It's your fault

This "fowl" blames others for everything. He or she is a boss and dictator who never does anything wrong. The most important thing to the hawk is his or her own judgment and opinion, not facts or how others feel. Hawks are strong on the outside, but weak emotionally. They may tend to feel better when they put others down.

Fowl #3: The Owl – Let’s be reasonable

This fowl is calm, cool and collected and shows no emotions or feelings. This fowl tends to lecture others like a child. This person feels vulnerable inside, and his or her ultra-reasonableness convinces him/her of his/her worth and intellect. It may be a compensation for feelings of inadequacy. This person is cold like a computer....and who wants to be friends with a computer?



Fowl #4: The Ostrich – If I ignore it, it will go away

This person is a master at stonewalling. He or she ignores disagreeable actions and comments and talks a whole lot about nothing at all. Ostriches avoid arguments because they are unsettling to them. This creates barriers to true communication because it doesn't allow people to get beyond the surface level.



To alleviate these unhealthy patterns, the first step is to identify which ones you and your teammates tend to fall into. Then decide you want to do away with the old and embrace new, healthy patterns. When you revert to the old pattern, admit wrong-doing and failure and do periodic self-checks to ensure you are engaging in healthy communication patterns.

Reflect. Which “fowls” have you been guilty of portraying? How can you consistently implement self-checks to ensure you change that negative communication pattern?