

It's All In The Mind: How To Turn Conflict On Its Head

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 30 April 2021

When dealing with disputes, whether at work or at home, the emphasis is often on skills; what to say, how to say it, and when. But concentrating on actions alone can be a mistake. What many people are missing, and what can be especially tricky when you are feeling stressed or angry, is to look at one's own mindset in conflict. In other words, how ideas, attitudes, and internal beliefs affect how disputes play out in the heat of the moment and over the longer term. And how to shift the focus beyond 'who said what' to help you achieve a more positive conflict mindset.

Keeping an open mind

When people find themselves in conflict – perhaps a colleague has raised their voice or made a sharp comment – it's a natural response to perceive this as a threat. Often the person on the receiving end will see themselves as victim and the other party as perpetrator. Defense and counter-attack can quickly escalate into a destructive cycle of conflict. The parties involved often become entrenched in existing positions and beliefs, becoming 'closed off' to other possibilities.

The first step in adopting a conflict mindset is therefore to keep an open mind. After a workplace mediation, parties often use words such as "open" or "open-minded" when they reflect on what they've learned from their experience of going through the mediation process. The key learning is that if people can open up to one another and to new ways of thinking, they are more likely to reach an understanding of each other as well as resolution.

Remaining open, however, is not always easy during a challenging conversation. It can help to recognize that the other person could be behaving in a certain way because they themselves are feeling under threat, and so are motivated by fear. Appreciating this and being non-judgmental can help diffuse the situation, helping them reduce their own threat level. Trying to understand the other person's perspective and being open to changing your views can also help you to find new ways out of the deadlock of conflict.

Becoming more aware of yourself and others

Take a moment to think about the assumptions and judgments you make when you are in conflict with a colleague. For example, do you assume that the other person is purposefully trying to undervalue you, bully you, or disrespect your work? What stories are you telling yourself about the other person to justify your point of view? And what stories are they telling themselves about you?

What does it feel like to interact with this colleague? Do you get sweaty palms, an increased heart rate, or tense muscles? These are all signs that the brain recognizes a threat and has triggered the fight-flight-freeze (FFF) response. This evolutionary response was essential in hunter-gatherer times but is not always as helpful in the office. Sometimes the physiological signs are more subtle, such as feeling unsettled, irritability, or fuzzy thinking. Recognizing when the body is responding in these

ways, and working out what triggered it, will enable you to become more self-aware and then choose to react differently.

Seizing the opportunity

Remaining open to new possibilities and becoming aware of your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors will help you break free of unhelpful patterns and gain new insights into conflict management. If conflict is viewed as an opportunity to learn more about oneself and the other person, you can build better and deeper relationships with your colleagues. Conflict resolution skills will be useful; a conflict resolution mindset will be critical.