



Flipping the Pancake: Knowing How to Convert Conflict into Problem Solving

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What do you do when you are suddenly approached by a staff member who is furious with a management decision or with something another associate has said or done?

We learn how to handle operational and technical crises on the job, but few of us receive any training on how to turn conflict into positive outcomes.

A good rule of thumb to remember is, *“whenever you see conflict stirring in the workplace, flip it like a pancake into problem solving...then forge a positive outcome.”*

Here are a few tips about handling conflict situations when approached by a frustrated or upset associate...



1. RECOGNIZE EMOTIONS AND STATE OF MIND AND DON'T JUMP TO CONCLUSIONS.

Don't start trying to solve the wrong problem! When people are frustrated, angry, or upset, their first attempt to explain the cause of the conflict will likely be loaded with the emotions of the moment. More often than not, we fall into the trap of simply reacting to what the person is saying instead of probing for a more defined cause before proceeding.

Highly frustrated people tend to give overstated and exasperated explanations of the events. If you listen to what they are saying...*and to what they're not saying....*you will begin to discover the actionable causes of the conflict.

2. WHAT DO WE HEAR WHEN WE LISTEN TO *WHAT IS NOT SAID*?

Virtually all workplace conflicts are fueled by feelings of *dissonance*, *discomfort*, and / or *frustration*.

DISSONANCE

Conflict is a reality of human interaction that often starts because of *dissonance*. A person experiences dissonance when he or she becomes preoccupied with the belief that things “are not the way they’re supposed to be!”

Example: An associate receives a rude e-mail from a co-worker.

The e-mail recipient knows that the teamwork standard for the workplace is, “we should be courteous with one another.” He or she then wrestles with dissonance: “Things are not the way they’re supposed to be! People should not be rude in their communications!”

DISCOMFORT

Dissonance gives way to a growing *discomfort* as the person continues to dwell on the event. The degree of discomfort varies with the nature of the problem and the impact upon the person. It can include hurt feelings, increased workload, or even physical pain and financial loss.

FRUSTRATION

Discomfort often leads to *frustration* if the problem persists or is ignored. If not resolved, frustration can evolve into anger. Anger that is expressed inappropriately can turn out to be an even larger problem than the original offending event.

When the person is experiencing...	Listen for the hidden message
Dissonance	“Things are not the way they are supposed to be.”
Discomfort	“Things are not the way they ought to be and it is causing me problems.”
Frustration	“Does anybody hear me? Is anyone going to do something about this?”

3. FLIPPING THE PANCAKE

So how is handling conflict like flipping a pancake? Easy! When you see conflict brewing, you flip it, like a pancake, into problem-solving.

To be effective, you must first acknowledge the dissonance, discomfort, and frustration the person is experiencing. Use the following three-step process for diminishing the intensity of the moment. Then ask problem-solving questions.

(1) Reduce the intensity of the moment

Step One: Address the dissonance. Communicate that you understand what the appropriate behavior is for the workplace and that *they believe* this has not been respected by the other person. (Don't take sides at this point until you know all the facts).

"You're right when you say that our communications should be courteous and respectful..."

Step Two: Use reflective listening to let the person know you understand the inconvenience and discomfort he or she is experiencing.

"I can see that you are really upset..."

Step Three: Paraphrase or ask clarifying questions to communicate that you hear what the person is saying. This reduces the person's level of frustration.

"Ok, let me make sure I understand what you're saying....yesterday you received an e-mail from Jeffrey and you believe it was rude..."

(2) Lead the person through a problem-solving discussion.

Get the person(s) involved in a brainstorming exercise to define:

- *The underlying issues.*
- *The contributing causes.*
- *A range of solutions that could be put in place to resolve the issue(s)*
- *Commitment of the parties to change behaviors or processes*

In summary, whenever you are confronted with conflict in the workplace, remember...acknowledge the emotions, but don't jump to conclusions. Instead, state the correct business principle, practice reflective listening, paraphrase, and then ask problem-solving questions. You will find that flipping the conflict into problem solving will give you more positive outcomes almost every time.

For practice in this technique, visit our Tool: [Preparing for Conflict Interaction](#).