

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO EFFECTIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION

While it is true that each conflict situation is different and beset with difficulties that stand in the way of its resolution, there are some obstacles that are common to most conflicts. Two general areas of obstacles to effective conflict resolution are problems of framing and problems of negotiation. Problems of framing are caused by our tendency to define what we want in all-or-nothing terms and our unwillingness to budge from our position. We become fixated on our position, taking an "I want this/I don't want that" approach. In other words, we set up a win/lose scenario. Conflicts are more effectively resolved if they are framed in terms of interests, or **reasons** why people want things, not positions. If conflicts can be framed in this manner, they are more likely to result in win/win outcomes for those involved.

Problems of negotiation sometimes involve taking an overly simple view of the problem by not realizing the impact of the conflict on the other party involved. Another way problems of negotiation manifest themselves is by assuming that everyone sees the situation as we do. We fail to consider the "other side of the story", and we believe that our view is obviously correct. Thus, we see no need to negotiate. By refusing to negotiate or by not negotiating in good faith, the conflict remains unresolved and both parties lose.

Following the steps of negotiation listed below will increase the likelihood of effective conflict resolution.

Step One: **Describe the conflict as a mutual problem.** In effect, this involves agreeing to disagree. Sometimes this is the only common ground we can find. For many people, just stating their complaint can be a huge challenge. A few tips: Avoid hints. The other party is likely to not pick up on them. State your complaint in behavioral, not personal, terms. Attacking the other party only makes him defensive and leads to escalation, not resolution, of the conflict.

Step Two: **Offer to negotiate differences.** This important step demonstrates your willingness to work with the other party to find a solution that will work for both of you.

Step Three: **Brainstorm alternative solutions together.** During brainstorming, the focus is on generating a large quantity of alternative solutions. No evaluation is made of the solutions at this stage; that comes later. Brainstorming works best if each party takes turns offering alternatives. If the parties involved want to

prepare their suggestions in advance of this brainstorming session, another opportunity to meet again for discussion should be scheduled.

Step Four: **Evaluate the brainstormed solutions.** Ideally, we want to eliminate solutions that are totally unacceptable for any reason to either party. When evaluating the solutions, ask the following questions: Would this solution really solve the problem? What would the costs be to each party? If the solution is unacceptable now, could it be put on hold and reconsidered at a later time?

Step Five: **Decide on the best solution.** One solution usually jumps out as much better than the rest. Resist the temptation to skip evaluating the other alternatives.

Step Six: **Plan how the solution will be implemented.** This step is often overlooked, resulting in great solutions that never leave the "drawing board". Items like assigning responsibility for action, developing a timeline for completion, and scheduling a follow-up meeting to determine how well the solution is working are issues to be addressed here.