



We all know that communication skills are important, and not just because they are a requirement on most job descriptions. Most of us communicate much of the day, every day, with clients or co-workers. But let's be honest: effective communication isn't easy, and it's easy to get frustrated or defensive when we're in conflict with a colleague or supervisor.

So how can you keep communication lines open even when facing conflict? This month, we sat down with Lisa Scolnick, a local Operations Leader and employee engagement guru. Scolnick's father was a tradesman, and she credits her belief in interpersonal communication to him. "When I told him about my career path, he said, 'Whatever you do, take care of your people.' I treat the people I work with the way I would treat my dad," she says. "When you can show people deep respect and truly listen to them, you break down those barriers of conflict and start making things happen."

Know When to Step Back...

When we think of confrontation, we often think of aggression, arguing, hostility, and anger. But, Scolnick argues, none of these are particularly helpful communication tools. "Don't be aggressive or defensive. Put down the sword and the shield. Hear the other person out and be open to a new perspective," Scolnick says. If you come to a conversation on the attack or on the defense, you're both going to dig in your heels, and there will be no middle ground.

...But Be Honest About Your Feelings

If you can't rely on anger to communicate your feelings, then you have to rely on honesty. Clearly and truthfully explain how the conflict upsets or hurts you. "Instead of projecting

yourself as the 'king of the hill,' calmly admit when you're frustrated or upset. Then share the positive outcome you'd like to see happen for everyone," Scolnick advises. "Your honesty will encourage others to trust and listen to you."

Listen to Understand

We often assume we know what someone said, what it meant, and why they did it—and our assumptions may be right, but they may also be completely incorrect. This is when you need to step back and start listening. "Tell your co-worker what you're upset about but then give them a chance to explain themselves. Don't listen to respond immediately, but listen to understand," Scolnick suggests. "Asking questions in a curious, non-threatening way is also helpful to get facts out in the open. Then allow your colleague space to communicate what they think and why."

"We are all human"

Finally, for Scolnick, the key to handling and resolving conflict is to assume good intentions. Don't let individuals trigger you because you've had a conflict with them in the past; try to view each situation independently. Once you make assumptions about someone, you won't see them objectively, and you certainly won't see their potential—you'll only see your assumptions about them.

So the next time you're in conflict with a co-worker, how can you avoid making assumptions? "Patience, patience, patience," Scolnick counsels. "We are all human, we are all on a journey, and no one can be expected to change overnight. Respectful communication is the first step." If you can commit to fixing problems in a positive way, by being truthful and kind, you can help make your workplace more inclusive and engaging for everyone.

Are you in an ongoing conflict situation?

Feel free to reach out to your EAP program to see if you can work towards ending the conflict through your mediation benefit. Our trained mediators help facilitate a conversation in a neutral location to work towards a joint solution that helps end the conflict cycle. Call EAP for more information.