

Conflict Management Techniques

For the effective management and hopefully ultimate resolution of conflict, there are two skills which are absolutely necessary— active listening, and the clear sharing of concerns through “I-messages.”

LISTEN. The area in which we most often fall short in our efforts to manage conflict is in listening. We fail to really listen to other people— their needs, wants, concerns, fears and feelings. Rather than listen, we question, defend, confront, or focus on getting our point across. In order to manage conflict effectively, we first have to listen:

Stop talking.

Give the person your total attention. You are not listening if you are thinking about what you are going to say next.

Be attentive. Get in a straight line with the other person. Assume an open posture and make regular eye contact. Physically react— nod, smile, shake your head in agreement, take notes. Clearly show through your actions that you are listening.

Open the door. Invite the person to share his or her thoughts, feelings, frustrations about the issue at hand. Use phrases such as “Tell me about it,” “Go on,” “Good point.”

Reflect. Summarize back to the person what has been said. “You are concerned with...,” “Let me make sure I understand...,” Reflect the feelings as well as the words spoken. “You are frustrated about...” Reflective listening clearly shows that you are listening and trying to understand, develops rapport, and ends miscommunication.

Probe. Ask for more information. “Please explain what you mean by...” “What are your suggestions for....” Don’t interrogate— seek to clarify the person’s needs, interests, and concerns.

Show genuine interest. Not until people feel listened to, understood, and respected in their views will they be open to your views.

USE “I” MESSAGES. The “I” message provides an effective means for expressing your thoughts in an assertive but non-threatening manner. It simply involves expressing your concern, needs, opinion, or feelings through an honest, straightforward statement that begins with the word “I.” “I’m concerned about....,” “I would prefer if we....,” “I suggest....”

Few people are at their best at County Fair time. People are hot and tired, they haven’t slept well or eaten properly, they’re busy juggling many tasks, their competitive spirit is at it’s highest, and they may be more prone to be impatient and irritable. Much conflict can be diffused and resolved by shifting back and forth between empathetic listening and I-messages to improve communication.