



Exercise: Reducing Barriers to Tolerating Conflict

Most of us are uncomfortable dealing with or tolerating conflict, whether it is between ourselves and another person, or between two other people. Conflict can trigger a range of emotional, cognitive and physical reactions. Many people, for example, can relate to the uncomfortable feelings that arise for spectators to a hostile argument between workers.

Certain other people aren't troubled by conflict, and may even enjoy conflict and become energized by it. They may see it as a game they play to win, and sometimes they fail to recognize the damage conflict may inflict upon others.

The way we react to conflict is shaped by a number of factors, including how conflict was managed in our families, what we have been told conflict means about ourselves, and our personal expectations for our own behaviour. Experiencing conflict is made even more uncomfortable if we feel that conflict should be avoided at all costs; if we interpret it to mean that we are not being respected, accepted or valued; or, if we think it indicates a lack of professionalism. But no matter how uncomfortable it may be, all managers can be more effective if they are adept at tolerating, and therefore have the ability to respond appropriately to, conflict.

It can be useful for you to reach a point where you can take a mental step back from conflict and contemplate how and why it is making you uncomfortable. Are there misunderstandings, unmet needs, stressors not related to the issue at hand, or past experiences that impact your emotions and behaviours? This type of contemplation can help you keep emotional interaction in perspective and explore what may be necessary for all involved in the conflict to retain a sense of dignity and move forward toward a resolution and new ways of interacting.

Reflect on the factors that make tolerating conflict difficult for you. Complete the following sentences:

When I am in a conflict situation...

...emotionally, I feel _____

...physically, I react by _____

...I have the following thoughts about myself _____

...I have the following thoughts about others _____

Now, think of situations in which you tolerated conflict well. What specifically did you do that was helpful?



Did you actively identify your emotional triggers?

Did you try to observe, understand, and thereby reduce the physical impact? Did you actively challenge thoughts and assumptions about yourself or others?

What worked?
