

Stages in resolving conflict

Conflict is a part of everyday life. It is not always a bad thing – it can lead to good discussion and improvements in the relationship between two people. However, if it's not handled properly, it can be destructive and can interfere with your studies or other areas of your life.

According to the Alberta Arbitration and Mediation Society (AAMS), we all have different styles of approaching conflict. Some of us avoid, others compete, compromise, accommodate or collaborate. Each of these styles has its strengths and weaknesses so it's important to know how you approach conflict.

The one most important thing to remember is that you can only control your own behaviour in any conflict and you are responsible for resolving any conflict you are involved in. Blaming others and refusing to take responsibility for your role in a conflict can only escalate the conflict and can lead to more anger, frustration, fear or resentment.

On the other hand, making the effort to listen without judgment, trying to understand the other party's needs, and searching for solutions in which everyone wins lead to healthy conflict resolution and may result in positive change.

It is not always easy to resolve conflict on your own. If you find that you just can't work it out with the other person, you may want to seek the help of a mediator, or a neutral party, to help you work through the conflict.

Stages of Conflict Resolution

1. First, it is important to set the environment for resolving a conflict. This means making sure that everyone involved (and no one else) is present, and that they feel safe enough to talk openly and honestly. You may want to set ground rules, like not allowing interruptions when one person is speaking, ensuring that each party has ample time to speak, that they each make an effort to listen to the others and that there is total respect and civility.
2. Secondly, an agenda should be set. What issues are you going to try to resolve? An issue is a topic, subject, behaviour, event or incident that is causing conflict; *an issue is never a person*. Issues should always be expressed using neutral terms. If there are a number of issues to address, you may want to set more than one meeting in order to give each the attention it requires.
3. The third stage involves trying to understand why this conflict occurred in the first place. Each person involved will have certain interests – concerns, hopes, expectations, assumptions, priorities, beliefs, fears and values – that need to be addressed in order to come to a win-win solution. For example, if you and your roommate are in conflict about the volume of music allowed in the evening, you need to look at why this is important. Do you use the evenings to study at home? Does your roommate feel that social relationships are a priority? Try to avoid positions, which are usually expressed early in the discussion and seem like a 'my-way-or-the-highway' kind of solution. Interest-based conflict resolution identifies and attempts to satisfy the underlying needs *of all parties involved*. By moving to deeper interests, the parties involved in a conflict open the possibility of a much wider range of creative solutions.
4. Finally, when each person feels like they understand the other's needs, you can begin to brainstorm solutions. It is important to give all suggestions equal consideration and not to evaluate any of them until you feel all possible options have been listed. Then go back to the interests you discussed earlier and decide if any of the proposed solutions address both of your interests.

Whether you use the services of a third-party mediator or negotiate a solution between yourselves, the following principles are crucial to constructive conflict resolution:

1. Address the conflict early, before it becomes much more complex;
2. Separate the person from the problem;
3. Use your discretion when deciding who to tell about the conflict. Not everyone needs to know;
4. Focus on interests rather than clinging to your position;
5. Commit to finding a mutually beneficial outcome – work toward win-win solutions;
6. Avoid blaming others; you are each responsible for your own behaviour;
7. Listen actively; genuinely try to understand the other person's perspective;
8. Validate what he or she is communicating to you;
9. Work on letting go of resentments – they can only impede the process;
10. Keep the lines of communication open; and
11. Focus on the future.

Be aware of the possibility that you may just have to agree to disagree. Not all conflict can be resolved. For most people, values are non-negotiable and they are not always in line with the values of others. In a diverse community