

7 Tips for Conflict Management

As an attorney, I'm frequently asked mediate disputes between people or groups. Along the way, I've developed some guidelines that served me well to keep the peace while managing opposing viewpoints.

1. Practice Active Listening – What are the REAL goals?

Frequently, people are so concerned with getting their turn to speak, they don't listen to what the other person is saying. Slow down and really listen to the other person (instead of thinking about your next response). Not only might you learn something important, but the speaker will appreciate your respectful demeanor.

2. Look for Common Ground. The best way to meet someone is in the middle – a place where you both agree. Start there, and work your way toward the areas where you disagree.

3. Choose Your Battles. Not everything is critically important. Many times, disagreements escalate because each party insists that every issue has equal and high importance. Prioritize your issues – what can you live without? What is really important? What must be resolved, right now, and what can wait until later?

4. Preserve Dignity. This is also called “saving face,” and it's not about you – it's about the other person. My greatest successes in conflict resolution are when I've made a point to preserve both my client's dignity and the dignity of the other person. If people feel that they are honored and valued as individuals and that their point of view is given credit by the other side, they spend more time working toward a solution to a problem, and less time defending their honor.

5. Speak Quietly and Use Civil Language. Loud voices and strong words (not only vulgar language, but inflammatory, belittling or other words that will stir up trouble and ignore Tip #4, above) focus on posturing, not on the problem. Most people listen less when voices are raised.

6. Step Back, Take a Breath, Cool Off. No matter what people say, conflict is personal. When people say, “don't take it personally,” they are only compounding the insult. Of course, it's personal, or else it wouldn't be a conflict. If you find yourself getting angry and offended, and unable to return the discussion to a point of reason, take a break. I have ended meetings when they start to get out of hand, rather than allow the discussion to devolve into personal attacks. This will give everyone a chance to cool off and think about things, and return ready for meaningful discussion.

7. Assume There is a Solution. How you approach conflict resolution is critical – if you believe that there is a way to resolve a conflict, you will find it. If you believe that the problem cannot be solved — you will prove yourself right.