

Messenger

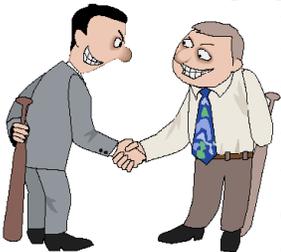
Vol. 10 No. 3

March, 2012

Successful Problem Solving Skills

This is our last issue discussing the importance of people skills. I hope you've enjoyed our journey as we've looked at how barriers to communication, listening skills, assertion skills, and, now, conflict management skills all play an important role in how we interactive with people on a daily basis.

We all know that conflict is unavoidable. When two or more people are together for any length of time, conflict is going to arise. Whether it's with a co-worker, boss, spouse, child, or friend (or with the countless other people who cross your path each day), conflict is going to happen in some shape or form. It may be a small squabble over what to watch on TV to a knock-out-drag-out that takes days to resolve.



While just the thought of conflict is enough to send some people headed for the hills, there are benefits of conflict. It can “encourage personal and intellectual growth, spur technological development, and help create and renew our. . . business organizations.” The goal is to determine how to “manage conflict in such a way as to minimize the risks and maximize the benefits”.

Psychologist Thomas Gordon developed a six-step collaborative problem-solving method. In learning about this process, I've found that it is easy to implement. It follows a very logical thought progression that is easy to understand.

Step 1: Define the problem in terms of needs, not solutions

Too often when we are faced with a problem, we state the problem in terms of *solutions*, not *needs*. Instead of two people arguing about needing the same conference room at the same time, focus on why the conference room is needed. The conference room isn't the need, that's a possible solution. The need is a place to hold a meeting. Once you realize that the conference room isn't the only place to meet, more solutions are immediately available. This will turn a win-lose situation into a win-win situation. In order to figure out the need of a situation, try to find out why the person wants the original solution. When you get down to the why, you will find the need.

Step 2: Brainstorm possible solutions

Now that the needs of the problem have been defined, you can look at all the possible solutions. Looking at this step from a needs perspective will open up a myriad of possibilities. As with any brainstorming session, the point of this step is not in quality suggestions, but in the quantity. You will

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The only difference between a problem and a solution is that people understand the solution.

***Charles Kettering (1876-1958)
Inventor, teacher, humanitarian***

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come up with ideas that aren't any good, but that's okay. When the session is over, you should have two or three ideas that will work.

During this session, there are key phrases that should never be used; "that will never work", "that is a dumb idea", "that's already been tried" are just a few. Now is not the time to analyze the solutions.

The most important thing to remember about this step is to not come to a brainstorming session with the "attitude that there is only one adequate solution to this conflict." That is the #1 way to ensure failure.

Step 3: Select the solution(s) that will best meet both parties' needs and check possible consequences

If any clarification is needed on any solutions, now is the time to do it. This should be very short and concise. You're still not evaluating any of the solutions yet--just clarifying.

Once all clarification is finished, ask the other person which possible solutions he or she favors. (Don't take the time to go through the list one-by-one.) Then tell which you favor the most. Hopefully, at least one of the choices will coincide. Those are the ones on which to focus. Once you come to a consensus on the solution that will be mutually desirable, think about any potential consequences that may come from it.

Step 4: Plan who will do what, where, and by when

Even though you've come up with an agreed upon solution, don't celebrate yet. You still have to iron

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***A problem well stated is a
problem half solved.
Charles Kettering (1876-1958)
Inventor, teacher, humanitarian***

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out all the implementation details. You'll need to decide who will do what, where, and by when. Sometimes our memories aren't the best, so it's a good idea to write out all the details so there's no confusion. Also during this time, plan when you will get back together to see how the implementation is going.

Step 5: Implement the plan

After all the talking and planning you've done, you can finally take action! Once you leave the meeting with your plan, do your part of the solution on schedule. If both of you are happy with the solution, you will both be more likely to follow through with the decision.



Step 6: Evaluate the problem-solving process and, at a later date, how well the solution turned out

Getting back together to see how the solution is working out will be of great benefit. Discuss the things you liked/didn't like about the process you followed. Was there anything that bothered you? Was there something you wish you wouldn't have said or done? What can you do better next time?

Evaluating the process will allow for greater success the next time.

If the solution is working for both of you, now is the time to celebrate! However, there are also times where the chosen action plan just doesn't work. That's okay. That's another reason to come together a second time. If you're not happy with the way things worked out, go through the brainstorming process again and come up with a different plan. The point is to keep communicating and listening to each other.

Adapted from *People Skills* by Robert Bolton, Ph.D.



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