

Negotiating a Solution

To get negotiations off to a good start with the other party in a dispute, open the conversation by expressing what you hope to accomplish at the meeting. It will also be important for you to connect with the other person, even if it is difficult. You can show positive feelings for the other person by:

- expressing what you appreciate about the other person or their contribution to the topic at hand,
- expressing why it is important that you both cooperate, focusing on the partnership aspect of your relationship, or
- being clear about your mutual goals and where you share common ground.

Now that you have opened the conversation and created a safe environment for both of you, these steps will carry you through towards a solution:

- Tell the other person you are curious about their experience. Try to learn as much as possible about their point of view.
- Truly listen, with your ears, eyes, and heart. Pay attention to the other person's tone of voice and the hidden emotions behind what they are saying. (They may be just as fearful as you.)
- Do not: interrupt, dismiss their concerns offhand, rush to give advice, insult them, question their motives, or change the subject. You will get your turn soon enough.
- Listen to the other person until they experience being listened to. Once they feel listened to, you will have earned yourself "a hearing" (they will listen to you). You do not have to agree with what they are saying; only understand that it is valid to them.
- Observe the other person's body language. This is the way people communicate what they think or feel even when their words say something quite different.
- When you sense that the other person has expressed all their views on the topic, it is your turn. Lead with facts not judgements. What can you see from your perspective that they have missed?
- Use "I" statements to describe what is bothering you. By starting with "I" you express how you feel without attacking or blaming. Starting with "you" puts people on the defensive, which will escalate the conflict. Instead of "You ruined our hedges. You never consult with me before you trim our hedges," say, "I was annoyed that you trimmed the hedges because I thought we agreed to discuss it first."

- Make resolving the dispute your priority, not winning or being right.
- Focus on the present. Holding on to old hurts and resentments will only make it harder to see the reality of your current situation.
- Be willing to forgive. Resolving conflict means letting go of the desire to punish or be right.
- Take responsibility for your role in the problem. In most conflicts, both parties share a degree of responsibility but we tend to blame the other. By taking responsibility for your role, you will diffuse the conflict and make resolution possible.
- Whenever you hit resistance, acknowledge the other person's feelings and needs. Accurately repeat back to them what their concerns are, demonstrating that you understood their point of view. Give them a chance to respond.

Now you are ready to propose some solutions to the problem.

Proposing a solution

The time to start talking about solutions is only after both sides in the dispute truly feel heard, and this can take time and patience. If you rush too quickly to a solution, it might not make sense later on and will be ignored. Here are some tips for finding solutions that are specific and meet everybody's needs:

- Take one issue at a time.
- Ask the other person what they think would work. Whatever they say, find something that you like and build on it.
- Come up with several possible solutions to the issue by "brainstorming" ideas. Do not reject ideas too quickly or rush to make a decision.
- Answer the question: Who could do what? For example, instead of asking someone to be more considerate, it would be more helpful to say, "Please give me a call before you start trimming the hedges between our houses."
- Consider using the phrase: Would you be willing to... This changes a demand into a request. For example, "Would you be willing to call or email me before you drop in."
- Clarify what each party values in a good solution. For example, an immediate or longer lasting solution. Inexpensive and within budget or more expensive today to save money and stress in the future.
- Frame solutions in the positive. Requests are best expressed by stating what we want done to meet our needs, not what we do not want done.

- If the conversation gets tough again, go back to asking for the other’s point of view.
- Summarize your ideas in writing and restate them back to each other to be sure you both agree with the intent of the solution and its specific language. Review it to ensure that:
 - It is fair and reasonable to both parties.
 - That you both have a stake and role in its implementation.
 - The actions are realistic: you have the time, energy, skills and resources to implement the agreement.
 - Everyone understands what they need to do and when to do it.
 - You have considered what you will do if there are other problems or conflicts in the future.

You should now have a plan for how to proceed that you are both committed to. If challenges come up, communicate openly about these challenges. If necessary, sit down again to discuss what might work. If you still cannot come to an agreement, consider other options.

Take time to reflect

What worked well in one situation may not in another, and because we cannot avoid conflict, it is useful to learn from our conversational mistakes and victories. When your conversation is over, ask yourself three questions:

1. What went well?
2. What did not go well?
3. What could I do differently next time?

You may want to write down the answers to these questions after each difficult conversation to reinforce what you’ve learned about making tough talks go a whole lot easier.