

Welcome to the latest edition of the microskills™ network for participants of microskills™ training around the world.

This edition is entirely devoted to what seems to be an increasing issue:

Handling conflict

Background

I've received several emails from people on microskills™ training run in various places around the world all asking for advice on handling conflict with colleagues. Whilst I am always happy to reply to these confidentially off line, I'll cover the generics here.

The basic principles

The principle of handling conflict, is to separate the behaviour from the person. Behaviours can be changed, people often can't. Discussions have to be logical rather than emotional and the direction for action has to forward about making positive changes, rather than backwards raking over past acrimonies. Don't embark on anything unless you are cool, calm and collected. This might mean leaving it for a couple days after a particularly annoying event.

Esteem

From the microskills™ training, the first stage is to question the esteem balance to see if you are being sucked into some psychological game playing. When someone lowers your esteem, it is terribly tempting to lower theirs in retaliation. They will then lower yours again and the game goes on until one of you turns to a group for support. If the other person sways the group and tries to alienate you from it, your options drop dramatically and you either have to find another group or withdraw completely. Neither action is particularly pleasant. So, first point, are you just so angry you

want retribution or is there a genuinely positive reason you want to pursue the matters? If it is retribution, this is where you rise above it, know that you are better than that and avoid the game playing.

problem ownership™ and authority

If you decide you want to take action, move on to problem ownership™ and determine if this is a situation or a problem. If it is a situation, it is just a description of what is happening. It might be irritating but, if it doesn't prevent you achieving an objective, there is nothing you can do except live with it. You don't have a problem if there is no objective at risk.

If it is raining and doesn't bother you, it is a situation and you have no problem. If it is raining when you have planned a barbecue, the rain is a situation that you can do nothing about, but you do have a problem because your objective of having an outdoor barbecue is in jeopardy. So direct your energy at achieving the barbecue, not complaining about the weather.

There could be lots of situations going on and you need to crystallise what objective or objectives you want to achieve that are being put at risk by all those situations. So your problem is how to achieve X, given that Y is happening, and it is only your problem if you have the authority to do something about it.

Within your authority, you can

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change the ways you personally work or operate. You also have the authority to approach other people to ask them to change. Of course, unless these people report to you hierarchically, then they have the authority to refuse. You can only try to influence and persuade. Failing that, you would have to escalate the problem to someone with higher authority. Before doing so, apply the 'pain test'. If it is more painful to escalate, then live with it. If it is more painful to live with it, then escalate.

Territory

If you do approach the individual(s) who are causing you trouble and if you have no authority over them, then from a territory point of view, it would be best to choose a neutral place. Coffee shops are ideal for this and you can even move into each other's space with drinks and snacks. It would be best to tackle people one at a time so that there are only two of you there. This will prevent the possibility of some of them taking sides and also avoid someone losing face in front of others.

The discussion itself must be forward oriented working together for the future. Make sure that it does not drift backwards, turning over ashes, as this will become blaming and acrimonious.

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From microskills™, the best way to confront the person is by using the Feedback Formula:

(1) *Give Information*, explaining a specific, preferably very recent, incident. It can be tempting to use *Giving Opinion* and add words like 'always' and 'never'. It is important to avoid anything that might lower

the receiver's esteem. For this same reason, it is preferable to use the third person more than the second person. So, "The data didn't arrive in time", not, "You were late submitting the data".

(2) *Give Information*, describing the effect of the behaviour from (1). Again, try to be as objective as you can. "This meant the monthly report was late."

(3) Plan a change on how to move forward. This might be by *Asking* the other person, "How can we ensure the report is on time in future?" or *Giving Information* yourself, "In future, I'd like the data sent to me in draft form as well, in case there is a delay with the final copy". Again, avoid *Giving Opinions*, even though they might look like *Asking*, "Why don't you ...?", "Wouldn't it be better if ...?"

If the other person is not as constructive as you and starts to *Give Opinions* designed to lower your esteem, revert to *Reflecting* what they say, *Encourage* them to talk more, perhaps *Ask* genuine questions if you are unclear and then *Summarise* to confirm you both understand their concern (but not necessarily agree with them). Use the *EARS* microskills™ to listen and *Giving Information* to explain, rather than *Giving Opinion* to fight back.

In handling conflict, the most important microskill™ to avoid is *Giving Opinion* unless it is a future oriented *Giving Opinion* on how working methods can be improved.

For more information

Please do contact me to discuss any of this further or for other applications of microskills™.

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