

Courageous Communication

Mediate.com : By Trime Persinger

Conflict happens when things don't go our way. Our sense of who we are or how we see the world has been challenged in some way. We experience a stress reaction, some kind of negative emotion. We could feel irritated, scared, or even numb. Our world becomes very small—we focus on the event that has provoked us, and are much less aware of other things that may be happening.

We feel conflict in our bodies. While different people experience different physiological reactions to conflict, everyone has some form of physical reaction. Some people react with tightened neck and shoulder muscles. Others start to sweat. Another common reaction is an upset stomach, or bowel. Whatever the physical reaction, it feels tight or cramped, and uncomfortable.

We want these uncomfortable emotions and sensations to go away. We have all learned different ways to manage conflict situations, but the bottom line is that we want to return to some degree of comfort, to ease the tightness that is so uncomfortable. We want to feel safe so that we can relax.

Trying to recapture this feeling of comfort and safety in conflict situations, we generally take the "direct route"; we try for a quick fix. That is, we try to win, to pacify the other person, or to avoid the situation altogether. Any of these strategies may work in the short run, but over the longer term they tend to make the problem worse. Sooner or later, we must deal with the fact that our efforts to make ourselves comfortable may not meet the needs of the other people in our lives. Nor does the quick fix lend itself to dealing with our own underlying issues.

In order to resolve conflict effectively for the long term, we must be willing to look beyond quick fixes. We must be willing to stay with our discomfort, even allow it to be heightened, in order to fully explore the other person's point of view and to fully disclose our own.

If we look more closely at the tightness we feel when we're in conflict, we see that it comes from fear. We fear losing ground, or shifting to accommodate the other person's point of view. We fear that we won't get our way.

So staying with our discomfort in a conflict situation takes courage. Not the brash courage of a Hollywood action hero, but the open, resilient courage of a warrior of the heart. It takes courage to look beyond your own point of view, to see things as the other person does. It takes courage to admit to being wrong.

It also takes courage to be true to yourself without judging or blaming. Being true to yourself is not about winning. It is about knowing when to create boundaries and when to yield. It is about speaking from a place of presence and grace.

Different skills are called for in different circumstances. In the workplace, it is often not appropriate to approach every conflict in the same way that you would approach a conflict with your spouse or your best friend. Nevertheless, the principles of courageous communication still apply. Conflict, any kind of conflict, is best resolved when you consciously strike a balance between being true to yourself, or your organization's interests, and being open to others.

"Courageous Communication" is the art of holding the uncertain balance between yourself and the other person as you explore what the conflict is really about for both of you. There are no guarantees in courageous communication. But there is the promise of more meaningful relationships, greater depth of experience, and a broader, more compassionate view of yourself and the world.