



Exploring Leadership

TEAMWORK: CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Conflict happens in every relationship—it's just part of life! But when handled poorly, it can lead to frustration, resentment, and broken connections. The key isn't to avoid conflict but to learn how to manage it in a way that strengthens relationships instead of damaging them. Whether it's a disagreement with a friend, a misunderstanding at work, or a tough conversation as a leader, knowing how to navigate conflict can turn challenges into opportunities for growth.

CONVERSATION STARTER:

How do you communicate with difficult people? Do you argue or stay silent, hoping the problem will go away? Neither is a great approach, but there is a simple strategy to help.

When emotions run high, it's easy to react instead of respond. But a simple three-step communication strategy can help you manage conflict without making things worse. Instead of arguing, focus on listening, acknowledging emotions, and expressing your thoughts clearly. You may not solve the problem immediately, but these steps create a foundation for a productive conversation rather than a shouting match.

EXPLORATION ACTIVITY:

In this activity, participants will practice managing conflicts calmly and respectfully while improving communication skills through role-playing scenarios.

FACILITATION TIPS:

- The goal of the exploration activity is to practice conflict management strategies, focusing on managing emotions rather than finding solutions.
- Monitor to ensure participants stay focused on practicing the intended strategies rather than offering solutions to the problems.

KEY OBJECTIVES:

- Practice paraphrasing to make sure others feel heard and understood.
- Practice using 'I feel' statements, rather than 'You' statements.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED:

- Copies of the Conflict Management Scenarios handout (see Appendix)
- Pens or pencils

- Hand out the Conflict Management Scenarios (see Appendix) and a writing utensil to each participant.
- Go over the three steps at the top of the page as a group. Discuss how each step can help in real-life situations.
- Pair up participants and have them take turns role-playing the scenarios. Each person will play the Conflict Manager, practicing the three steps: Paraphrase, Acknowledge Feelings, and use 'I' statements. Tell them are practicing the strategies, not solving the problem.
- After practicing, have each pair choose a scenario and write an ideal response focused on managing the conflict.
- Share the written responses with the group and reflect on the skills practiced.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- Which of the three steps is the most difficult for you? Why?
- How can you make your conflict management responses sound more natural?

APPLICATION DISCUSSION:

- What do you think is the main cause of conflict among your age group? Why?
- If you were to use this strategy in a real conflict, what qualities would you need to demonstrate, like honesty, respect, patience, or courage?
- Are there any situations where you think this conflict management strategy might not work? Why?



CONCLUSION:

Conflict doesn't have to be destructive—it can be a chance to build stronger connections. Using tools like paraphrasing, acknowledging emotions, and using “I” statements helps lower tension and foster understanding. When both sides feel heard and respected, real solutions become possible. Next time you face a disagreement, remember: the goal isn't to win the argument but to work together toward a solution.

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REFERENCES

- Burns, David, M.D. *Feeling Good Together*. New York: Broadway Books, 2008.
- Conflict Resolution Skills <https://healthsmartva.pwnet.org/uploads/rtditor/file/Conflict%20Resolution%20Role%20Plays.pdf>



APPENDIX:

Try this three-part communication strategy the next time you feel conflict arising during a conversation.

1) Paraphrase: Summarize the other person's position in your own words. This shows you're listening, not just waiting for your turn to speak, and it can reduce tension in a difficult conversation. Try these starters:

- "What you seem to be saying is..."
- "What I hear you saying is..."
- "Tell me if I got this right. You said that...."
- "Let me make sure I understand you. You said..."

2) Acknowledge Feelings: Let the other person know you understand how they feel. This takes effort because it requires seeing things from their perspective. Examples include:

- "I'm sure that must feel..."
- "You're probably feeling..."
- "That is very (sad, frustrating, upsetting, etc.)..."
- "I can tell you are..."

3) Use "I" Statements: Express your position with "I" statements, not "you" statements. Share your feelings without blaming or accusing. Avoid saying, "I feel that you are..." because it's still a "you" statement. Instead, say:

- "I feel..." or "I need..."

Example Response Using All Three Parts:

- "I hear you say it's Sara's fault we lost the game, and I know it sucks to lose. You must be feeling disappointed because you played so hard. From my perspective, I feel Sara was doing her best, and I want to be a supportive teammate, so it makes me uncomfortable that you seem so upset at Sara."

Scenarios for Practice/Role Play: Take turns practicing the strategies in common conflict scenarios.

- Your friend says: *"If you tell the assistant principal you have an appointment, we can leave early. You'd only be missing PE. It's not like your grades are going to drop. C'mon, it'll be fun!"*
- While shooting hoops, your friend stops a younger kid on a bike and demands the kid's hat. Your friend says: *"C'mon! Don't be a killjoy! It's just a stupid hat! Older kids took my stuff all the time when I was little. It's just how things are."*
- Some friends keep making fun of your clothes and haircut, but they laugh and say: *"Just joking."*
- You shared a personal story with a friend who promised not to tell anyone, but they did. When you confront them, they say: *"A week from now, they won't even remember what I told them. Don't be mad."*
- As the teacher hands out a test, the student next to you says: *"I had a family emergency last night, so you'll let me copy your answers, right?"*