

Conquering Conflict

Part 1 (of 3)

By Cheryl Crumb

It's an angry world out there. Listen in on any street corner, house, or office and you'll hear screaming, swearing, spitting... all because people see the world differently and don't have the skills to work things out. I'm a mother-wife-daughter-sister-aunt-neighbour-friend-colleague-customer-supplier-human being. In other words, I've experienced conflict!

Many people think conflict is dysfunctional and should be avoided, and if avoided, it will eventually go away. The truth, however, is that conflicts will always occur and need to occur, they can be managed and they can enhance relationships. Peter Senge in his ground-breaking book, "The Fifth Discipline" over a decade ago said "contrary to popular myth, great teams are not characterized by an absence of conflict". The trick is to learn how to manage conflict rather than have it consume you or others.

This series of three articles will deal with conquering conflict, the what's, the why's and the how's... with customers, colleagues and chain of command.

Let's first examine why conflict so frequently leads to broken relationships and ineffective solutions. We get caught up in the Seven Sins of Conflict:

Enemy #1 - Years of competitive upbringing have taught us that we need to WIN, and therefore the other person must lose.

Enemy #2 - We fail to empathize or see the other person's position as clearly as we see our own.

Enemy #3 - We lack discipline to really listen to our fight partner.

Enemy #4 - We forget that the other person is "right" from their perspective. We fail to overcome our natural impulse to view the world through our eyes only.

Enemy #5 - We use language (words - voice - body) that is aggressive and throws others into a retaliatory space.

Enemy #6 - We focus on what divides us rather than on what we share in common.

Enemy #7 - We become entrenched in our position which leads us to think "Either it's my way or your way". This blinds us to other possibilities that are undoubtedly available.

So, for the rest of this article, see yourself as a sales or service provider in a retail establishment. You're facing a conflict situation with a customer. Something didn't

happen that was expected and the customer is unhappy. Examples: the delivery schedule had to be adjusted; the TV doesn't do what the customer thought it would; the customer feels the pricing is unfair.

Before we look at the skills in dealing with these difficult situations, let's look at the context. The first thing to consider is that it's not about being "right". That makes someone else "wrong". We need to literally let go of our righteousness, wave goodbye to it. Secondly, we need to realize that whatever we say/do will have an immediate effect on the customer. When a customer is upset... or expects to be upset... those emotions are cotton balls in their ears. In other words, they won't hear you, and if we are upset as well, we won't hear them. Also, our choice of verbal/non-verbal language might trigger them into a mood of anger and resistance.

Consider a long-term customer who says, "I don't like the way your store has evolved from a friendly, know-your-customer establishment to just another big heartless organization whose sole goal is to make money. Why have you sacrificed your service strategy?" He's clearly in a place of disappointment and although a question is being asked of the salesperson, it's folly to address the question immediately until the customer's pain is clearly understood.

Let's look at some responses and evaluate their effectiveness:

Response A: *"We haven't sacrificed our values. Business is more competitive now and organizational survival is dependent upon growth. We've actually increased our customer base since we made these changes."*

Evaluation - Although you were factual, your response implies:

- You're defensive.
- It's the customer's problem.
- You're not holding yourself accountable.
- You're giving an excuse.
- You're showing no sensitivity to his disappointment.
- In effect.....you really don't care.

Response B: *"This is obviously an important issue to you and your opinion is very important to us. You've been with us since the tough early days. Help me understand what's missing for you now."*

Evaluation - This language conveys:

- You value the customer's feedback.
- You're holding yourself accountable for finding solution possibilities.
- You're listening.
- In effect....you care.

In successfully resolving any conflict, we need to adhere to three golden rules. Violation of any of these principles can lead to knock-down, drag-out fights:

1. Treat the other person with respect. Keep mindful that their viewpoint is valid, no matter how different it is from yours. Become aware that hurtful words, sarcasm, rolling of the eyes communicate disrespect. Respect doesn't mean agreement; it means that you are validating the truth as they see it. It creates a space for discussion and shows a willingness to be open.

2. Before offering your side, seek to understand their perspective by intense listening, questioning and restating. This is more than repeating back what was said...it's exposing ourselves to our fight partner's position so intensely that we feel a magnetized pull toward it. We allow ourselves to see the power behind their perspective.

3. Offer your views, needs and feelings by avoiding loaded words. Assertively but briefly state how you see the situation and share your feelings and mood. Until emotion is addressed, it's unlikely that practical issues will get resolved. The customer is not the enemy, the customer may not be right, but the customer is the customer. Respect for his role and for his humanity, opening yourself to experience his perspective, and assertively declaring yourself are the tools toward collaboration.

